Speak the Truth

Volume Two

Twoony

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sarahroberts4313@gmail.com

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Dedication

This book is still for all the fans who have supported Aron and Quinton's story for a whole decade. I see no reason why y'all don't deserve three book dedications so prepare to see this page in volume three as well.

Thank you!

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CHAPTER ONE

The unexpected dating status between Quinton and I come up faster than I imagined it would.

Aday before spring break ends, I get a frantic phone call from Autumn; “How the hell did you manage it?”

“Manage what?” I ask while shoving a few things into my bag.

I probably wouldn’t be packing if it weren’t for Quinton, who reminded me to do so. I played it off as if I already knew that it would be a good idea to pack sooner rather than later. Although he said nothing about my obvious lie, he gave me a look. You know the look that says ‘I can clearly see through your bullshit, but arguing with you about it isn’t worth my time’? Yeah, that one.

Our spring break ends tomorrow. Willow and her family left a few days ago. As expected, she didn’t talk to me after our movie tonight. She would speak to me in front of our parents when absolutely necessary, but other

than that, she kept away from me. Part of me feels bad about it and wished to speak with her, but I know that would be too much. Anyway, back to Autumn!

“Getting an official dating status with Quinton,” Autumn says, sounding genuinely surprised.

I choke out of shock. How in the hell did she...? Quinton had to have told her! How else would she know? Who knew Quinton was the gossiping type.

“When did Quinton tell you?” I huff.

“Well, he didn’t mean to,” she says, giggling. “I called to see how things were going.”

So she was snooping.

“He wasn’t complaining as much, which is a signal that something good happened.”

As much? So he has complained? Asshole.

“I simply asked if he was having a good time on his honeymoon with his boyfriend and he said it was tolerable. He didn’t deny that you were his boyfriend, so I took that as you two are officially dating and you confirmed that assumption by overreacting.”

“You tricked me,” I say.

“You bet your ass I did. I should work for some secret intelligence service after I graduate. I’m pretty good at getting information.”

“I don’t want to imagine you as some secret government agent. You’d probably sell out your country for a million dollars.”

“I would never!” She hesitates. “Unless I knew I could get away with it. Enough about that, give me the details. How did this happen?”

I zip up my suitcase and shrug. “It just did.”

“A dating status with your archenemy doesn’t just happen. Something stirred the pot.”

“Nothing worth sharing.”

Autumn remains silent for a long moment, then laughs. “You got physical, didn’t you?”

And here I am choking for the second time this evening. I barely regain my composure enough to whisper, “What? No!”

“That tone says yes, but I will stop prying because you clearly don’t want to talk about it. Yet. But I am here if you ever change your mind.”

“Thanks, I think?” I glance towards my bedroom door where Quinton is stepping in, then whisper over the line. “I have to go. Talk to you later.”

“Bye,” she sings.

I don’t even get to say hello to Quinton before he’s standing beside me staring at his phone. I raise a brow when his curious gaze lands on me.

“Why is Autumn messaging me about whether we got—” He holds up a hand to make quotation marks. “Physical, over break?”

I fall onto my bed in laughter. Quinton asked that so seriously. How could he keep such a straight face while asking about why his best friend is asking for details on our possible sexual encounters? Most people wouldn’t be able to stop laughing, but Quinton asks like he’s in a bloody meeting.

“I haven’t a clue. She’s your crazy friend,” I say.

“Who spoke with you a moment ago and learned that we did more than just kiss during spring break.” Quinton takes a seat on my bed, continuing to read through the many texts Autumn sent him.

“Hey!” I lean over to whack the back of his head. “You’re the one who didn’t deny our boyfriend status, so she started asking. Don’t blame me she

caught on when it wouldn’t have even happened if you hadn’t clued her in first.”

“She didn’t need clueing in. She’s suspected it for months.”

“Months?” I stare wide-eyed at the boy who simply nods while attempting to reply to Autumn without giving anything away. From where I’m sitting I swear I read a ‘fuck off’ in that text. Knowing Quinton, that is probably all it said. Still, he suspected for months? Oh god...was I that obvious?

If Autumn, a girl who simply heard more than saw, suspected we were together, then what about everyone else? If a rumor about me being gay—though technically it isn’t a rumor, albeit false since I do still like girls, I am dating the cold-hearted pretty boy—nothing good would come of it. My father’s name would be dragged through the mud because of me. I was trying to be so cool about us the other day yet here I am freaking out over it again. Get it together, me! Be stubborn and cool like the other day! You can do it!

Oh shit. Langley. He has to know. I have suspected that he knows something, but he couldn’t possibly be thinking the same thing, right? He would have said something or asked. At least, I think he would have said something.

Even if he suspects it, I should tell him so he knows for sure. Langley is my best friend. He wouldn’t actually hate me because of this, right?

Sick feelings rise in my stomach.

I like to think he wouldn’t but no one truly knows a person until they’re put into a situation where they are forced to act. What do I do if Langley isn’t okay with Quinton and I? He’s my best friend. I have so little people that I can trust, so to lose one would be devastating.

“Whatever you’re mentally freaking out about, stop it. You know you can hurt yourself thinking too hard,” Quinton says with a devious smirk.

“And you are going to get yourself an ass kicking if you don’t stop being a dick.”

Quinton snorts. “Yeah, think whatever helps you sleep at night, Princess.”

“Would you mind if I told Langley?” Major turn of the conversation but sometimes my mouth goes off before my brain has time to process what I want to say.

Quinton rests his phone on my bedside table. He leans back onto his elbows and shrugs. “That’s up to you.”

“Why only me? It affects you too.”

Quinton looks at me with a blank stare that makes me squirm. Though I cannot read through his eyes what he is thinking, I get this feeling that it isn’t good. Sighing, he asks a question that sends a shiver down my spine, “Out of the two of us, who will be more affected should the truth come out?”

Yet again, this problem arises. We both know it’s me who would suffer the most from our relationship getting out. I was thinking the same thing earlier. Hell, I was thinking about it the other day with Willow. If people were to find out, I would be so screwed. Sure, Quinton would get ragged on too as the boyfriend of the prince, but all eyes would be mostly on me. After fifteen minutes of fame Quinton would be forgotten and I’d probably be paired up with any guy I was seen speaking to.

I know I got all philosophical or some shit earlier, but truthfully, I need time. We both need time. Time to wrap our heads around this new relationship we’re in. Time to think of what we’re going to say or how we’re going to react when the truth gets out. It’s not as if there haven’t been

openly queer aristocrats before. I know of a few, but most aren't the heirs to a throne, so they don't have the same problem as me.

"I guess there wasn't much of a point to us admitting that we're dating. It's not like we can tell anyone." I sigh, flinching at how dejected I sound. Quinton had to have caught that...and I tried so hard the other day to sound all confident and cool. I suppose I can't expect myself to just get over it so easily.

"Does it matter?" Quinton asks, no longer looking at me but now at the ceiling seeing as he has fallen onto his back. He sighs again and rests his hand behind his head. "We know it so who cares."

"Wow," I whistle and move over to hang my head over his. Quinton squints up at my grin. "I didn't think you'd be so laid back about this. My speech must have worked."

"One of us has to use their brain in this relationship," he says, tapping my forehead with his fist for emphasis, but does not deny that my speech was excellent. Seriously, it was. I should get some praise here.

"I hate you," I growl anyway.

Quinton rolls his eyes. "The feeling's mutual."

I pull away with a heavy sigh. He didn't answer the question, but he never said I couldn't either.

"I'm going to tell him. It feels wrong to lie." Because he is my best friend and I miss having someone to talk to. Sure, I have Autumn and she's sweet, but we go to different schools. We only talk over the phone.

Quinton hums. I fall onto my back to rest next to him. Neither of us move, choosing to stare at my totally fascinating ceiling.

"I guess our friends will know. That's cool, right?" I ask.

“I guess.” Quinton turns to face me with a curious look, like he isn’t sure what I’m getting at.

Ha! He doesn’t know something for once. I guess we’re all good at something and I’m apparently good at stumping Mr. Know-It-All over here. I shouldn’t be as proud of that accomplishment as I am.

“What I mean is, we don’t really have to hide around them, you know?” I ask, trying to clarify.

“We aren’t holding hands or some shit if that’s what you’re getting at.” Quinton’s voice is enough to tell me he is disgusted by the idea. I roll my eyes.

“Because holding hands is so much worse than jerking another guy off,” I say, grinning.

“Don’t worry. It won’t happen again. Everyone is allowed a moment of insanity.”

Insanity he claims, yet an hour later we do, anyway. Who’s the childish one now? I won’t say that though out of fear that he may actually decide against ever helping me get off again. I rather not go back to getting off on my own, thanks.

I double check that I’m finished packing later that evening. I can’t help but feel depressed about our departure. Tomorrow is our last day of spring break. I hate to admit it, but spring break went so much faster with Quinton around. It’s not like I spent my break much differently than any other time, yet it ended so quickly. Quinton mostly read as I played games. On the days I had to study or go through boring meetings with my father, Quinton would wait for me, usually by reading in his room.

Every now and again, I’d get him to play a game with me, but he really sucked. I would laugh, which would result in him huffing and going back to

read. To think something so simple as having Quinton around would make our vacation end in a flash. The thought is a little sickening, so I send the boy a glare that he glares back at even though he does not know why I'm doing it.

I'm not the only one who enjoyed Quinton's company. My mom has fallen in love with the kid. She constantly checked in to make sure he was enjoying himself. About every morning, I found them awake before me eating breakfast together. Mom said every day about how smart and funny Quinton was. I can't help but think she's insane because Quinton is anything but funny. Every time she complimented him, he'd send me a smug smirk that I wanted to slap off his annoyingly stupid face!

By the end of break, my mom already insisted on me bringing him over more often. I think she's already asked if he wanted to come over some time during summer vacation. I was going to ask him eventually, Mom, stop jumping the gun!

It's the last night. Tomorrow we'll be leaving in the afternoon. I'm mostly dreading it. Sure, I want to see Langley and fill him in on what's going on. At the same time, the idea makes my stomach churn. I feel sick. I don't even know what to say. I need to stop fretting about it. I'll think of something later. For now, I need to sleep because my eyes actually hurt from being so heavy.

I sigh and turn onto my side to find Quinton fast asleep. I can't help but smile.

Why did I bother putting him in a guest bedroom? Neither of us has slept alone all break. I said nothing about how Quinton wouldn't make any move to leave when either of us got tired. Quinton said nothing about how I didn't ask him to leave. I'm sure if either of us brought up the fact that we've been

sharing the same bed all week, we'd stop and that would just ruin it, so we've kept our mouths shut.

I don't know if Quinton is aware, but whenever he sleeps, he curls up like a cat with his hands clasped beneath his chin and legs brought up. Whenever I see him like this, I can't help but wonder if he's cold. Sighing, I move closer. The moment I do, the boy stirs in his sleep. I wait until there's no sign of him waking before wrapping my arms around him. He must have found this to be a good idea because, soon, he had his head on my chest and a leg thrown over my waist.

I bite my lip to hold back a chuckle. I wish I could tease him about how I always knew he had kindness in him and it had to come out sometime. The idea of him not cuddling like this with me at night makes me keep it to myself. I will keep my mouth shut about enjoying sleeping this way too because I rather not ruin this either.

All fluffy moments of ours must come to an end, and I am reminded of Quinton's lack of caring the next day when we're on our way back to Thorton's.

"Will you come with me?" I ask with a voice hardly above a whisper.

"You're joking," he replies.

"Whatever, never mind."

"Stop overreacting." Quinton sighs, sounding utterly exhausted, which he probably is. I have been panicking the entire way back to school. Quinton has had the same look since he left, one that tells me how tiresome he finds me, but I don't care. I'm allowed to be tiresome! I'm about to tell my best friend that, not only am I dating a guy, but that guy is the one who has been my arch nemesis since I've come to Thorton's!

Ok, so we haven't been enemies for a while now. Langley has clearly caught onto that, but still, it has to be weird. Will he even believe me? Will he think I'm joking? How am I supposed to bring it up? Should I just walk in and say 'Hey Langley, got something to tell you that's kind of important. I'm dating Quinton!' That's probably too blunt. He'll definitely think it's a joke.

Quinton shakes his head beside me. It's as if he knows what I'm thinking and is insulting me in his own mind. He probably is. No, I know he is, because Quinton doesn't have a soul, so he has no problem with the idea of possibly losing a friend. Jerk.

"I have a soul."

"Huh?" I stare at Quinton wide-eyed. How did he know what I was thinking? I knew it. He does read minds! What the hell? That's not even fair!

"You said that out loud," he says, followed by the hundredth sigh today. He runs a hand through his hair, messing the already untamable dark locks. "He's your best friend, right?"

I nod. Is he going to give me advice? Hold on, I need to record this. It's a miracle!

"If he's a true friend, he'll be okay with it," he says.

How very Quinton-like. I won't admit it, but that makes me feel better because it's true. A true friend would be happy if their friend is happy. If Langley is as close to me as I think he is, he will accept how I feel.

I sigh and nod, as if to say that everything will be fine. I will be ok.

Quinton and I part ways at school. I head to my room with heavy steps, yet somehow I make it in record time. I was hoping Langley wouldn't be

back yet, but when had the world ever been on my side? Langley is there, putting his things away when I enter.

Langley smiles upon seeing me. “Hey, Aron! I’m slightly surprised to see you alive.”

“What does that mean?” I laugh, although my insides are squirming. The toilet seems like a great place to be at the moment, seeing as I’m about ready to upchuck.

“Quinton,” he answers. Hearing his name makes my toes curl because, in a moment, I am about to tell Langley a bit about Quinton and I.

Gah, I don’t know if I can do this! Looking at my best friend, who has been with me for so long that the idea of losing him physically hurts, shakes the already trembling courage I have built up during the plane ride back.

“Neither of you are in body bags and that is great,” Langley continues to joke, not noticing my inner turmoil.

“Ha...ha...yeah.” Way to not sound freaked out, Aron. Langley obviously notices my strange behavior. He stares at me when I rest my luggage on my bed and play with the zipper.

“Actually, “ I mumble, staring at said zipper I am continuing to tug back and forth. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“Oh, no.” Langley’s eyes grow wide. A moment of silence passes between us, but my mind is screaming. Shit, does he know already?

“He is in a body bag, isn’t he?” Apparently not.

The corner of my mouth twitches a bit with the desire to smile. His joking is helping me continue. “No. Surprisingly, he’s still breathing.”

“Oh, ok, good, because I’m not helping you hide his body or anything.” Langley is trying to joke around, but I am failing to give him the responses

he wants. When I don’t laugh at his joke, he knows I have something serious to talk about, so he walks over to take a seat on my bed.

“Are we going to have another therapy session that I will not get properly compensated for?” He asks with a disgusted scowl.

“Maybe.” I take a seat on my bed, keeping my luggage between us. In case it doesn’t go well, there will be something for me to block myself with. Better safe than sorry!

“Ok, what’s up?”

I can’t bring myself to look at him out of fear that I may see the utter disgust that he may show on his face after hearing what I have to say. Taking in possibly the deepest breath I have ever taken in my life, I sputter out, “You know Q-Quinton and I haven’t really b-been fighting recently. I mean, w-we are, but not like we used to, which is w-weird, but what’s even weirder is that we uh...are kind of...you know...together.”

“Together?” Langley asks.

“Yeah.” I bite my lip until it aches. “You know, like...d-d-dating together.”

That feels really weird to say. A good weird.

Langley sighs. “Since when?”

Why does that matter? I want to ask, but decide against it in case he’s bothered. I don’t want to make him angry if he isn’t already. With a shaky breath, I answer, “We kind of...made it official over break.”

Silence follows. Every passing second feels like an eternity. Somehow, I hear the ticking of time when there isn’t a single clock in the room. Anything and everything around me freezes with an eerie silence that makes my limbs shake.

I clench my eyes shut when I hear Langley take in a breath and flinch when the boy grumbles, “Son of a bitch.”

My chest burns with fear and regret. I am ready to open my mouth to apologize and beg for forgiveness, but Langley grumbles to himself, “Couldn’t you have worked up the nerve to ask him out sooner? Now I owe Ariel 50 bucks, dude! Thanks a lot.”

Hold it. Say what?

I finally whip my head from the luggage, ignoring the way my neck cracks from the force, to stare wide-eyed at Langley. He’s pouting at me. He doesn’t look bothered at all. Not at Quinton and me, at least. He seems more concerned with this 50-dollar bet.

Hold on. A bet? With Ariel?

“I’m confused,” I whisper.

“Real shocker there,” Langley teases with a laugh that dies down when he sees the confusion and fear on my face. “I’m not stupid,” he adds. “Did you think I didn’t know something was up between you two?”

With a slack jaw, I sputter out, “I...no...maybe...kind of. I thought you knew that we were getting along, but no—was I really obvious?”

My eyes grow to the size of saucers. Please tell me I wasn’t so obvious and that the whole school is talking about us. I couldn’t handle that!

“I’m your best friend. Of course I know!” He slams his hands against his chest to emphasize. “And Ariel knows because she’s around us and we discussed it. She also has no problem with it, by the way,” he says with a wave of his hand. “I doubt if anyone else has noticed, seeing as I haven’t heard anything, so don’t worry about it.”

He pats my shoulder, and the feeling makes me smile. It’s like he’s touching me on purpose to show that it really doesn’t bother him.

“To be honest, I thought you guys were dating since the Valentine’s Day dance.” He tacks on with a sly grin.

“What?” I squeak.

“Ariel and I thought you were acting all weird, so we made a bet. She said you two weren’t together while I bet you were and now I owe her 50 bucks!” He jabs me in the chest. “Thanks to you! Give me half.”

He holds out his hand expectantly, but sorry I’m still flabbergasted.

“I can’t believe you bet on me. Why didn’t you ask or say anything?!” I huff. Because I’ve been freaking out. It would have been nice to have someone to talk to, yet he just sat around let me mentally beat myself up. What an ass!

Langley sighs and acts like Quinton with the way he’s staring at me like I’m an idiot. “I knew you would deny it. There was no point in saying anything. You’re kind of like,” He hums and swings his arm around in the air. “Like a cat. I had to wait for you to come to me.”

I punch him hard in the shoulder while he laughs. “That’s not even funny, you little shit! I’ve been freaking out thinking that you’d hate me or something!”

Langley gasps, acting hurt as he presses a hand to his chest. “I am offended that you would think such a thing!” My scowl shows I don’t find this funny, so the boy smiles and playfully punches my shoulder. “Come on, we’re best friends. You sucking dick will not change anything. Actually, it makes it better because now I have less competition!”

“Not really. I still like girls, so I am still very much a threat.”

Langley cackles like a crazed witch. “Aw, it’s cute that you think you have anything against me.”

Rolling my eyes, I push his stupid laughing face away. “You’re still an ass.”

“Sorry, sorry, but seriously, this doesn’t change anything.” He ruffles my hair with a soft smile that helps my crazily beating heart. “I’m glad you told me, but from now on don’t hide stuff, ok? You should know I’m always here to listen to your constant meltdowns.”

“I don’t have meltdowns,” I grumble.

“Are you sure about this?” Langley asks, his voice suddenly becoming very serious. I can already imagine what he’s thinking. I’ve been thinking about it since I started developing these feelings; the repercussions towards me and my family.

“Yeah.” I nod, more to myself than him. “I can’t deny my feelings, even if the two of us can’t be open about them.”

Langley pats my shoulder and gives it a good squeeze. “Anyway, now that you’re finally out of the closet, let’s lay some ground rules.”

I cock a brow at the boy, who is actually grabbing a post-it-note to write said ground rules on.

“What ground rules?” I ask.

“First, please warn Langley of any possible dude on dude action so Langley is not forced to witness possibly the most disgusting thing in the world,” he says while scribbling rule one onto the note.

“If I’m involved, you should feel honored to witness such a thing.” I hold my chin up high.

“Second.” Langley totally ignored me and holds up two fingers. “Keep the making out to a minimum while Langley is around because the idea of seeing Quinton all lovey-dovey makes Langley’s skin crawl.”

“Why is Langley speaking in third person?” He’s actually writing these rules down and sticking them on the wall. I shake my head at him.

“Third, please don’t ask Langley any sex related questions like which position would be best for anal because he does not know nor does he want to imagine his best friend or Quinton in those positions.”

My face flushes as I holler, “As if I’d ask you!”

“Fourth, and lastly, Langley is to be paid for having to listen to any and all relationship problems because, knowing Aron and Quinton, there will be many. Langley should get paid. It’s only logical.”

I nod, completely agreeing. Knowing us, there will be. I wonder how long we’ll last before getting into a huge argument. I am going to say a week, especially now that we’re at school. One of us will piss the other off. Come on, it’s us. We can never be fully civil.

“Is Langley done with his rules?” I ask after he places the so-called last rule on the wall.

“Yep! Please follow these rules.” Langley pats the notes. “If you don’t, you must pay the toll of five dollars.”

“Sounds fair. Do these rules apply to Langley and Ariel, seeing as Aron has no desire to walk in on Langley’s pale ass, either?” I ask around a toothy grin to which he glares at.

Pursing his lips in thoughts, Langley nods. “Fine. They apply.”

The two of us laugh at the new rules on the wall. Langley pats my shoulder one last time before returning to unpacking and telling me everything that happened over break. Apparently, Ariel meeting his parents went well. He has nothing but good stories to tell. I’m happy for him. Ariel is a great girl, who is apparently perfectly ok with Quinton and I, seeing as she was in on the bet with Langley. It feels nice to have so many people knowing the truth, although there aren’t really many. Considering who I am,

that’s probably the best we’ll get. I’m lucky to have a friend like Langley. I don’t know what I’d do without the idiot.

A couple minutes after our conversation, I receive a text that makes me grin.

Quinton: You still breathing?

He can claim not to care all he wants, but him texting me is proof enough that he was concerned about Langley’s reaction as well. I have to bite my lip to prevent Langley from seeing how stupidly happy I am at the thought.

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CHAPTER TWO

“Remind me again why I wanted to go to public school?” Because it should be a crime to get up this early. It’s tough going from two weeks of freedom where waking up at noon is acceptable to coming back to a place where waking at 7am is necessary. The sun didn’t even want to rise, seeing as it was hidden behind clouds making the already sad morning worse.

“Because you’re insane,” Langley replies around a long yawn. His eyes are as half-mast as mine. I keep rubbing said eyes to get the eye boogers out. Gross. I wipe them from my hand to Langley’s shoulder.

“Ew, dude,” he grumbles.

I snicker, continuing on our way to class, which is very boring. During class, I actually pass out and ram my head against the desk before tumbling out of the chair. The entire class erupts with laughter.

The professor looks back at me with a glare, but simply says, “Try to stay awake, Mr. Vaughn.”

I nod and smile sheepishly. Beside me, Langley grins, so I punch his leg since the ass hadn’t even bothered to try to keep me awake. Lunchtime cannot get here fast enough. When it finally does, I bolt with Langley hot on my heels. We’re in the cafeteria in no time, stomachs growling loudly enough for it to be embarrassing.

“Calm down,” a familiar female voice says from behind us. I glance back to see Ariel making her way to the line with a smile. Langley’s face breaks into an enormous grin that makes me stick out my tongue in disgust.

“Hello Ariel,” I greet the smiling girl, who kisses Langley. “Gross.”

“Shut up, my partner is way prettier than yours,” Langley whispers.

I shove him away hard as he laughs. Ariel giggles too and, hey, that reminds me.

“I can’t believe you bet on me.” I point accusingly at Ariel. She holds her hands up in surrender. “Him,” I kick Langley in the ankle. “I can understand, but you? That isn’t right.”

Ariel shrugs her shoulders. “Sorry, but I couldn’t pass up an easy 50 bucks.”

“Easy!” Now she’s teasing me, isn’t she? “We weren’t that obvious.”

“No, but a woman’s intuition is scary.”

Langley nods vigorously, mouth stuffed with food. “It is.”

Ariel grimaces at him for speaking with his mouth full. He smiles sheepishly at her, to which she rolls her eyes at. She and I grab our own trays and the two of them make their way to a table. Though they say nothing, I hear the both of them snickering when I pull out my phone to ask Quinton if he’s in the library. When he says he is, I don’t even bother

asking. I head straight to the library. Behind me, Langley howls with laughter, but I ignore the bastard and make a mental note to kill him later.

“Hello,” I greet Quinton when I find him in the same spot as last time in the library. He doesn’t seem shocked to see me or surprised that I take a seat across from him and start eating my lunch.

“Is this going to be a reoccurring thing?” He asks, sounding annoyed, yet he takes a fry from my tray to pop into his mouth. I scowl at the boy, who dares take my food when his lunch is next. This is mine!

I wrap an arm around my tray to defend my precious and answer, “Maybe not if you try to take my food again.”

“Well, if that’s the case...” The bastard reaches for my food again, so I whack him over the head. He narrows his eyes and continues to move over the table towards me. I continue to protect my food, watching and waiting for him to advance and try to steal it, but he catches me off guard.

My eyes widen when he presses a soft, lingering kiss to my lips. After a few seconds of shock, I eagerly reply. When he pulls away to reveal mischievous brown eyes, I know that I have been robbed. I look down at my tray to see the bastard had taken a handful of fries. Before I retrieve them, he shoves the food into his mouth.

“You bastard!” I holler, slamming my hand over my mouth. I feel violated!

Quinton shrugs, continuing to happily munch on my lunch. I’m about to kick the shit out of him when I hear, “Quinton?”

Both of us turn to find a petite brunette standing in the aisle. My heart stops. Shit, did she see us?

Biting my lip, I look at Quinton to see he has narrowed his gaze on her. He must be wondering the same thing as me. However, the small girl says

nothing of our kiss. Smiling kindly, she says, “Oh, Your Highness, I’m sorry. Am I bothering you?”

I shake my head and hands to signal to the poor girl, who actually shrinks beneath my gaze.

“No, no, not at all.” I scratch at the back of my head. “And Aron is fine.”

She blinks rapidly. “Ok... Aron.”

“What are you doing here, Raina?” Quinton asks. I am looking at him now. He knows her, so they probably have a class or something together.

Raina smiles shyly and turns her attention to Quinton as well. “Since we both had a study hall this period, I thought we could work a bit on our chemistry project, but I see that you’re busy...”

She looks at me. I quickly shake my head.

“No, no, don’t mind me. You two can work on your project. I was just here to bug this asshole!” I laugh and playfully reach across to slap Quinton’s shoulder. The boy is really glaring at me and I don’t know why. What did I do this time?

“I should probably go then.” I laugh and get up to leave. However, Quinton reaches out to grab my wrist. I stare wide-eyed at him when he tugs my sleeve.

“Sit,” he orders. That should piss me off that he’s ordering me. However, my stomach erupts with very manly butterflies. How butterflies can be manly, I have no idea, but let’s say they are for my sake.

Dumbly nodding, I do as he says without realizing it. I take my seat and stare down at my lunch that I am now poking at with my fingers with a blush on my cheeks.

He turns back to Raina to say, “We can start working on our project together another day. Aron was speaking with me first. We’ll talk more in

class tomorrow.”

Raina nods prior to saying goodbye, I think. I wasn’t really listening. My heart thumps so loud that the noise blocks out all sound around me. I’m nervous Quinton may hear it. I bite my lip because—damn, he just acted like...like a boyfriend. Like a boyfriend who actually wants to spend time with me, so he made Raina leave. Gah!

I hide my face with my hands and rub at the skin, hoping that it’d somehow cool me down. It doesn’t. I keep blushing even when I peek out between my fingers to see Quinton staring at me oddly. Really, I should look at him oddly because he did that!

Crap, am I allowed to think he did that because he wanted to spend time with me? It’s so cheesy, but why else would he pull me back down and brush her off? A very pretty girl, might I add. Raina with the pretty brunette hair and bright brown eyes. Not that Quinton has ever shown any open interest towards anyone, but come on, no one could deny she was very pretty.

“She was hot,” I finally say after clearing my throat. I shove some of my burger into my mouth and say nothing when Quinton reaches for more of my fries.

Quinton shrugs. “I suppose she is.”

“So you two have chemistry together?”

Quinton nods and shoves whatever he was reading into his bag. He rests his elbows on the table and his chin on his hands. I have to swallow the lump in my throat. Why is he staring at me instead of working on something? Isn’t he supposed to be a crazy, studying bookworm? Stop staring at me!

“You two could have worked on your project now. It’s not like you to pass up an opportunity to do well in your classes. What’s wrong? Were you worried she’d be too infatuated with me to concentrate?” Yes, good job Aron. Joking around always works!

Quinton scoffs. “No. I simply knew that you don’t have the mindset to comprehend chemistry. We’d have to call an ambulance to remove your unconscious body after only a minute of hearing our discussion.”

“I am not that dumb! And I don’t even need to understand it. It’s just that —I don’t want to, like, get in the way or anything.” I wave my hand dismissively.

“You’re not,” he says. “I wouldn’t have told her to leave if you were.”

“So why did you?” I ask.

Shit, why did I ask that? He’s going to think I want him to say something cheesy, which I totally don’t! Right? I don’t, right? There’s something wrong with me. I need therapy. Screw you Quinton, it’s your fault!

Quinton’s stumped for a moment. I bite the insides of my cheek while looking at our surroundings rather than risk blushing even more.

“Because I knew later you’d go all crazy on me about how I didn’t want to spend time with you like the total kid that you are,” he finally says.

I look at him so fast my neck cracks. I flinch at the pain but ignore it to shout at the jerk. “Like hell I would!”

He smirks. Why is he smirking? Wait a minute!

“And I’m not a kid!” I kick at him beneath the table, but he avoids all of them. “Fuck you!”

The bastard makes my blush worsen when his eyes glisten mischievously in a way that should be illegal and he purrs, “You wish."

Ok, so my heart skips, and I consciously or not lick my lips while my eyes run over his own. Let's pretend like none of that happened. Let's say I totally do not find the bastard so utterly attractive right now that I actually consider jumping across the table to attack him. Heart, can you take a break for a moment because I cannot handle you beating against my rib cage like that? And it's so clear he knows what he is doing to me because he continues just looking and smirking and, damn, this bastard is the worst!

"Can you... stop? I'm feeling all grossed out here." I fake a scowl.

"I beg to differ." Again, with the purring. How does he do that?

"I beg to punch you in your pretty boy face."

His eyes glaze over with devious intent. "So you find me attractive?"

I slam my head against the table, now completely forgetting about my lunch, although the bastard seems to enjoy it. He's eaten all my fries. All that is left is half of my burger. For a second, I think he's going to eat it but he goes for my drink and I gape at how he so easily drinks from it as if it's totally normal.

Wait, is it normal? I guess it is because we're dating, but people don't know. I look around to check if anyone is nearby. There isn't, which is no shock, but still I panic a bit at the idea of someone seeing Quinton drinking after me. Who said he could drink after me!?

"Why are you stealing all of my nourishment?" I grab my drink and hold it against my chest. "My fries I can deal with, but you are not taking my soda."

"I only wanted a sip. Soda is disgusting anyway." He scowls, smacking his lips together as if the taste offended him.

"There is no way you are a member of the human race that dislikes soda."

My disbelief is ignored by the boy, who says, “I’ll probably be working on my project with Raina during study hall after today.”

And somehow I completely forget my disbelief. I feel my shoulders slump at hearing that. Realization hits me. Our already limited time together is about to become even more limited.

I like hanging out with the bastard. We don’t have classes together, though. This is the only time during school we can see each other. Langley will definitely tease me tomorrow if I stay in the cafeteria with him and Ariel. He’ll probably ask if we’ve already had a lover’s quarrel, which will piss me off and I will be forced to dispose of him.

Quinton has to do his project, though. I can’t get all childish and complain about us not spending time together. We can always hang out after class.

Quinton removes his gaze from me to place it on the books behind me. I want to say that he’s disappointed at the idea of us not hanging out during his study hall, but who knows, he might like the idea. At least I think that until he says, “You can still come down if you want, but I’m not explaining anything to you.”

I feel my face break into a smile, a smile that he rolls his eyes at.

“Don’t get excited. I’m only saying this so you can’t complain later,” he says, keeping his eyes on the books behind me rather than on my painful smile.

“Sure, whatever helps you sleep at night, Princess,” I mock him from what he has once said to me. He sends me a glare that is nowhere near frightening, more like it was forced out to make him appear angry. Would it be weird for me to say he’s cute? It’s weird, isn’t it?

“Never mind. Don’t bother.” Quinton scoffs.

“Too late!” And you bet I will come down to bother him because he offered! He dug his own grave. Not my fault if he regrets it or not.

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CHAPTER THREE

Our first day back from break ends.

Langley groans beside Ariel about how he already has homework. Ariel walks between us, occasionally glancing at me with a smirk whenever Langley says something stupid, which is often. I smile back at her and shake my head at my best friend, who continues on and on about how it should be illegal to have work the first day back from break. I completely agree, but I am not in the mood to complain, for once.

“So, Aron,” Ariel calls.

I smile at hearing my name. She’s definitely getting used to calling me by my name, and I love it. Man, to think once I actually enjoyed people calling me Your Highness or My Lord. Now I can’t even stand it.

“Yes, Ariel?” I happily hum.

“How was lunch?”

“None of your business,” I answer, glaring at the giggling girl.

She elbows me playfully while Langley peeks over to watch my reaction. “No need to be shy,” she says. “Langley and I are totally ok with it.”

“So?! It doesn’t mean I need to tell you anything. Shoo.”

Ariel shrugs. “I’m just curious about your love life, My Lord. I wish to know that you are being taken the utmost care of.”

I point at the brunette and look at Langley. “I changed my mind. I don’t like this one. Get rid of her.”

Langley shakes his head. “No, no, she’s right. We’re only concerned about your well being, Your Highness. How are your hips?”

Ariel throws her hands over her lips to conceal her giggles.

“Nothing like that has happened!” I hiss. The jerks actually give me disbelieving looks, and I groan at them. I should have never told Langley, although it was obvious he already knew, even so, now they are teasing me about it! If that’s how they want to play it, so be it.

“What about you two?” I grin at the blush that takes over both of their faces.

“How is your love life going? I hope Langley has been taking care of you.” I wiggle my eyebrows at Ariel. Her face swiftly takes on the tone of a firetruck. Langley whistles to himself, scratching nervously at his neck. “Hmm, your reactions are suspicious. I hope you kiddies are using protection. We wouldn’t want any happy little accidents.”

Ariel slaps Langley’s arm, who looks to her in confusion why he is the one being slapped. I cackle evilly, feeling victorious that I got sweet, sweet revenge. As if I would lose to either of them. Quinton is far worse than the both of them combined and I have been putting up with him for years! Nothing this trivial will defeat me.

Speaking of Quinton, I pull out my phone to see I haven't got a message from him. He doesn't have to text me all day or anything, but I was thinking he might ask if I wanted to come to his dorm after class today. Is he busy? I could ask or go on and march over there like I own the place because. Let's face it, he expects me to act like an idiot.

"As much as I'd love to spend every waking moment with the two of you," I sing to the two scarlet children beside me. "I have other things to do!"

"Like Quinton." Langley grins.

I don't even bother that with a response. I head off towards Quinton's dorm room. Why I go there rather than invite him to mine is beyond me. I guess because I assumed Langley and Ariel are going to our dorm? I don't know, but I pound on Quinton's door in no time. There's hushed voices and movement within before the door opens to reveal Raina. Quinton sits at his desk, back facing me. That's kind of irritating, but I put on a cordial smile for Raina.

"Aron," she says, seeming to have easily gotten into calling me by my name, looking between Quinton and me. "I did not know you were coming over."

"Yeah, I usually come over whenever I please," I answer around a grin, though I feel like running into the room to smack the jerk that still isn't looking at me. Look here, ya big jerk! I've come to grace you with my presence.

Raina laughs. Her light brown eyes linger on Quinton. "I see. You two are pretty close."

"I wouldn't say close." Close enough to make out and exchange some hand jobs, but you know, no one else needs to know that. "It's more like we

have no one else to tolerate us, so we tolerate each other. It's like a pity friendship."

Raina continues laughing at my jokes, which boosts my self-esteem a bit, not gonna lie. Man, I may have a boyfriend, but I am still good with the ladies. Quinton, on the other hand, does not find as much enjoyment in my jokes, seeing as he asks coldly, "What do you want?"

He still isn't looking at me. I fist my hands at my side for being ignored so obviously. "I came over to hang out for a bit, but if you're busy, go ahead and tell me."

"Oh no, it's fine!" Raina declares, retreating into the room to grab her things. She walks over to Quinton to say something I can't quite catch before looking back at me. "We have our last class of the day together, so we were talking about our project. We'll finish our talk later. I hope we can talk again, Aron!"

She waves to me, looks at Quinton one last time, though he keeps his back turned to her too before leaving.

Ten minutes later, I'm thinking she should have stayed, seeing as Quinton hasn't said a word since she left. He flips through what appears to be his homework, scribbling answers to the questions. Every couple of seconds, the lead of his pencil snaps from the force of his writing. Is he mad about something?

"Should I go?" I ask, watching how he actually breaks the lead pencil in his grasp. He groans and tosses the thing into the trash. It hits the side of the trash can with a loud 'ding.'

"Are you ok?" I ask. He is seriously being weird. Quinton rarely ever looks so bothered. It scares me a bit. "I know you think I'm stupid, but I can still listen if there's something bothering you."

Quinton sighs. It’s the first time I’ve ever heard him sound so exhausted. This doesn’t sound like the exhaustion he gets from spending time with me. No, this is real, physical and mental exhaustion that leaves me wondering what could have possibly made him feel so drained.

He didn’t even bother to hide the obvious annoyance in the sound. A part of me feels triumphant at having earned enough of his trust to let him feel so comfortable around me to let his guard down. Another part is worried, seeing as he never does such a thing.

I get up to walk over to him to tap his shoulder. He sighs again and finally looks at me, but I think it might have been better if he hadn’t. His eyes are half-mast, full of some type of annoyance, anger, frustration, and exhaustion. Whatever happened is really bothering him, to the point that it’s obvious. Usually, nothing is obvious about Quinton.

I bite my lip and hesitantly squeeze his shoulder. I’m still getting used to this boyfriend thing, ok give me a break!

“What’s wrong?” I mumble.

Quinton gets up, brushing my hand off as he does. He runs a hand through his hair and moves from the desk to his bed. He falls onto his stomach with an ‘umph,’ but pats the space beside him as if to say ‘come here.’ I roll my eyes. Leave it to Quinton to demand I come over rather than ask.

I lay beside him and nearly shouted when he immediately turns onto his side in order to pull me into him, his chest pressed into my back. What in hell’s name is he doing, being all cuddly? What if Taylor walks in? I thought he was the one who didn’t want to do this! Hold on, give me a moment. I am not mentally prepared.

“Uh... uhm... ah... what are you doing?” I ask as my brain melts into mush from the close proximity. A shiver runs down my spine at a distinctively hot

breath that fans over my neck.

“I’m tired,” he answers, as if it’s totally normal to grab me simply because he’s tired. Then again, it’s Quinton and he will deem what he finds fit to be normal regardless of what others think. The bastard.

“And that is a reason to cuddle with me whenever you said you didn’t want to do this lovey dovey shit, how?”

I don’t receive an answer other than a soft breath that tells me he actually fell asleep. My jaw drops. How did he fall asleep so fast? Is he actually asleep or is he faking it?

I turn a bit in order to peek back at him. He looks asleep. Although I want to shake the bastard awake and demand he explain himself, I can’t bring myself to do it. There’s a reason he’s so tired, a reason he’s so bothered. Maybe he needs to rest. For once, I remain silent and do as he wishes me to. I lay there as my brain puts itself into overdrive, asking many questions while attempting to come up with answers that are immediately shot down.

I’m not sure how long we stay like this, long enough for my arm to fall asleep by the way we’re laying. Sighing, I elbow Quinton in the gut. He grunts and grumbles some form of profanity at me, to which I roll my eyes at. “My arm is asleep. It hurts. Get your ass up.”

After some more elbowing, Quinton finally does as I wish and rises like the undead. He rubs his tired eyes and allows me freedom. Thank goodness, because I really have to piss too! I run to the bathroom, sighing as I relieve myself.

I kind of expect Quinton to talk about whatever is up when I come back, but instead he’s back at his desk doing homework. I should have known better. Like the most closed off guy in the world would ever willingly talk

about his problems. Ok, so I probably wouldn't either, but I can complain internally!

I retake my place on his bed and watch on, utterly bored. I want to ask what's wrong, but he looks really done, like he might just flip shit if I bother him too much. I guess everyone needs their space, needs time to think, even Quinton. I opt to not ask and instead keep him company. I talk about my first day back to classes. When he doesn't make too many smart-ass comments, I take that as my permission to continue.

Quinton occasionally hums or nods to show that he is actually paying attention. When I complain about my abundance of homework that I have yet to even look at, he chuckles and basically says I'm too much of a dumb ass to do the homework, anyway. I do everything in my power to keep him from successfully doing his homework, which results in us rolling across the floor, his homework in my hands as he tries to get it back.

"Stop being a child," he says through gritted teeth. "Unlike you, I care about my grades."

"I care. I just don't overachieve like some people!" I push his chest with my foot and hold his tablet away from him.

He grabs my ankle. I curse as he pulls me across the carpet. Ouch! He's between my legs now and his fingers are about to grip the tablet when I quickly throw it. It skids across the room and under Taylor's bed.

Speaking of Taylor, "Where is your roommate?" I ask.

"Tutoring." Quinton's voice is muffled, telling me he is looking beneath the bed for his homework. I watch, amused by how he tries to squeeze under the bed. After a couple minutes, he finally retrieves it and looks at me with a glare that I only smile at.

He returns to his homework, but I don’t bother him anymore. Instead, I play some games until it gets a bit later. I announce that I’m leaving and I’m about to go out the door when Quinton calls me over. I raise a curious brow, but walk over to the boy, anyway. I am wide-eyed when he grabs my jacket and pulls me down to press a long kiss to my lips. It’s nothing deep, just a sweet kiss that somehow leaves me breathless and blushing.

For the first time that evening, Quinton appears to feel better, seeing as that smug expression is back on his face. I should scowl or frown or yell at him, but I smile, happy to see a familiar expression.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says more than asks. I roll my eyes.

“Because you’d miss me too much if you went even a day without me, right?” I wink playfully.

He shoves me away. “Leave, idiot.”

I wave goodbye, still smiling like a total goof. I’m glad that, even if it was just for a second, he seemed to be ok. I’m even happier that it was because of me.

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CHAPTER FOUR

I thought Quinton would be better the next day, but he isn't. I may only see him once during lunch, but something is off. I hate admitting that I notice such slight changes in his behavior that others would either pay no mind to or even notice, and yet, to me, they are huge signs, to his obvious annoyance. It goes to show how much I've had my eyes on him. Aron, you've got some serious problems.

Raina is here, jibber-jabbering away with me, and sometimes getting scowled at by Quinton for talking rather than working. Quinton throws a few of those scowls towards me when I distract either of them. Hey mister, you said I could come down, so don't look at me like that!

I sit across from the two of them, eating my lunch, doing my best not to stare at Quinton too much. It's actually a lot harder than I'd like to admit, not because I enjoy looking at him or anything! No, no, that would just be silly. I'm only doing this to notice his changes in behavior.

Like he had said, I have absolutely no idea what the hell they are talking about. Some kind of chemistry shit that I don't understand. I have regular chem, which I can hardly keep up with, so advanced is way out of the question. I do my best not to disturb them, though every now and again I feel the desire to leave, seeing as I can't contribute much to the conversation. However, whenever I make any kind of move to leave, Quinton sends me this look that glues me in place. I don't know how to explain it, as if his eyes are saying how he actually wishes for me to stay or perhaps I'm imagining it, but the expression makes me stay put every time.

Raina doesn't notice how odd Quinton is being because she obviously doesn't know him like I do. He keeps tapping his pencil impatiently, eyes moving from Raina to the books to me then back to his work. Quinton is known as a man who keeps eye contact. Looking away is a sign of backing down in his book. Quinton does not back down. He isn't sitting properly like he usually does. His shoulders seem slumped. He keeps scrunching his nose like he's annoyed or deep in thought about something that bothers him.

Quinton seems to be especially put off whenever Raina touches him, which she does a lot. I want to say it's because she's friendly, but it's starting to even bug me now. She keeps putting her hand on his shoulder or leaning over to brush up against him. Once she even patted his head like he was some kind of dog. I sat here, stunned, as Quinton's eye twitched from controlling the urge to chuck her out a window. I would have teased him, but he looked seriously ready to murder someone. Why he hasn't asked her to stop, I don't know. Maybe he's trying to be nice? But that isn't very Quinton-like. Normally he's fine with telling people off, so why isn't he doing it to Raina?

They’re partners in chemistry, but Quinton doesn’t need a partner. He’s a bloody genius. If anything, Raina is probably holding him back. I know, mean to say, but Quinton is top in the school. I don’t know about Raina. She’s in Advanced Chemistry with Quinton so she has to be sort of smart. It’s odd to see him like this, though. I wrack my brain for an answer. Something happened between when we hung out during lunch yesterday and when I went over last night. That’s not a lot of time for something to happen. The incident had to occur during school, but what? Did he do badly on a midterm? No, the grades have been out for a while now. Could he have gotten into a fight with someone?

I roll my eyes. Like a fight would bother Quinton. He probably kicked the shit out of them, put them back in their place, and walked off with the wind blowing through his silky black locks. What could it be? I can’t think of anything that would make him act so weird. Does he know he’s acting weird? He has to know.

The bell rings, signaling the end of my lunch and their study hall. Raina pouts, facing me. “Aw, we were having so much fun though,” she says.

Quinton rolls his eyes. I have to be the adult and reply to her with a smile, “We’ll hang out again tomorrow.”

“Ok, then I will see you later, Aron!” She waves and leaves with Quinton for lunch. It kind of pisses me off that they have lunch together, too. If they have lunch together, why couldn’t she have left him alone during study hall so he and I could hang out?

Whoa, whoa, whoa, what did I say? They are working on a project together and she does not know that Quinton and I are together, so why would she leave us alone? And I shouldn’t be annoyed that he’s hanging out with her. He can hang out with other people if he wants to, although in this

case he’s forced because of a class. I can’t be getting mad because we didn’t have some alone time. I’ll see him after class.

I head for my next class, head hung low and arms swinging lifelessly at my side. Langley must notice this because he jabs me in the side and asks, “What’s with the long face?”

“Is it wrong for me to be mad at a girl who is unaware that she is getting between my alone time with my...you know?” Because there’s no way I’m saying boyfriend out loud in school.

Langley holds out his hand for money. I swat it away because he’s my best friend. He is meant to lend an ear for free! Fuck his stupid rules.

Laughing, he replies with a slight shrug, “It happens. Feelings are never bad. I get jealous of Ariel talking with other guys, although I have no reason to. It’s natural. Normal. We just shouldn’t do anything stupid because of it.”

“Define stupid.”

“Don’t do anything, Aron. Knowing you, it’ll be stupid.”

Ignoring his insult, I bring up my second problem of the day. “Also Quinton is acting weird and I don’t know if I’m supposed to point it out or interrogate him or what. This is much more difficult with him. Damn, Quinton makes it so difficult being all stubborn and shit.”

“I am going to point out that you are as stubborn as he is so you both make it difficult,” Langley says, shrugging innocently at my glare.

“Wow, thanks dude, you’re so helpful,” I say, my voice oozing with sarcasm.

Langley smiles and pats my shoulder reassuringly. We head to our next class, my problem still unsolved. I sat throughout my classes the rest of the day wondering what the hell crawled up Quinton’s ass and died. I try texting him. Through texts, he seems pretty normal. He teases me like he

always does. He answers fairly quickly most of the time. So what in the hell could be bothering him? I try to think it over...could…

Could someone have said something about his dad again? I know that works him up whenever he is compared to him. Professor Bennett did it once. Quinton seemed pretty ticked off about it. Wouldn't he talk to me if that were the case, though?

I sigh. Quinton, the walking enigma. He is driving me nuts. I thought once we got over our mutual sexual frustration and started dating, things would be easier, and yet he is still an ass, a very stubborn ass. Can't he tell me what's wrong? He knows I will probably never find out, which will lead to me acting like an idiot and freaking out like I always do. We could skip that step completely if he would talk to me.

Oh god, I sound like a nagging husband who has been married to his silent partner for too long. I want him to talk to me. It's exactly what a married couple would say! I slam my hands against my face in utter horror. What have I become?!

Doing my best not to think like that helps the day move by faster. Before I know it, it's nearing the end of the day. I am ready to bolt out the door to Quintons when I receive a text from him saying that Raina and he are going to go into town to get materials for their project. I frown, looks like I won't be getting the answer out of him today, but that's not the only reason I'm frowning.

I'm feeling totally jealous that the two of them can leave campus whenever they wish, unlike me. It's so not cool that I can't leave, but I was lucky I talked my dad into it once, so I doubt he'd allow it again.

It'd be nice if he did, though. Quinton and I haven't actually gone on, like, a d-d-date. I can't even think of it in my head without stuttering. How sad is

that? But it’s normal because we’re dating. We should go on dates and dates are nice. I want to go to the movies or to a café or out to eat with him. I want us to be able to do fun things together off campus. We could go shoot paintball or play laser tag or go bowling! Couples do fun stuff like that, right?

Would he like to do stuff like that? I wonder if Quinton has ever even thought about us going on a date. Knowing him, probably not, the unsociable ass. I would ask if there was any hope for us to do any of that. Dad would probably say that we could watch a movie at the house or have coffee and good food at home. We have an arcade, so why go outside? I wonder if that’s the whole reason he got so many of those things so that I’d be able to at least experience such things. It’s not like I can’t go out, but we get death threats every day. Eyes are always on me. My parents feel much safer with me being watched by people we can trust. I totally get that and I respect their wishes, but sometimes I want to have a day where I can go out and enjoy myself.

I don’t want to be followed by guards or paparazzi. I want Quinton and I to walk around together hand in hand and not have to worry about those around us. I want to be able to hug and kiss him whenever I wish, without the worry of others seeing. I want us to do things that couples do. Is that wrong to want such things? Does it make me a bad person to want that?

Man, sometimes I don’t even know how I go on such tangents. My brain functions like no other. One minute it’s thinking about this and the next it’s about something completely different. I need to stop thinking about such depressing shit, though; it’s giving me a headache. I’ve already accepted that Quinton and I will never have the ideal relationship. I’m content that we have a relationship at all.

I head back to my dorm to find Langley and Ariel there. I sigh in relief at seeing that they are only studying and I haven't walked in on any sort of hanky panky.

"Way to be a cock block," Langley says, although it's clear neither of them are doing anything.

I smile. "What else are friends for?"

"I thought you'd be at Quinton's," Ariel says, giggling.

"He and Raina went to get shit for their chemistry project, freaking advanced class, overachievers," I grumble. I wish I could have gone along with them...or rather just Quinton and I. Yeah, I would have preferred that.

"Raina?" Ariel asks, looking confused. "Like, little brown-haired girl, super pretty?"

"Yeah, do you know her?" I ask.

Ariel nods. "She's normally shy, so I imagined that she'd be intimidated by a guy like Quinton."

"She seems like a chatterbox to me. Quinton was glaring at her about as much as he was me earlier," I say around a snort. Quinton is just weird, choosing to spend 75% of his life silent as a rock than interacting with the rest of the human population.

Langley, deciding now to cut into the conversation, looks at me with a grin and asks, "Why are you so bothered about not hanging out with your lover boy? Getting a little jealous, are we?"

Ariel laughs along with her boyfriend, both thoroughly enjoying the way my cheeks heat up. I narrow my eyes on the both of them and say seriously, "I am not scared to kick both of you out of not only this school, but also the country."

Ariel tries to silence her giggles while Langley fakes being stabbed in the chest. He makes some strange gurgling sounds, I think, are the sound of him dying and falls back onto his bed. I roll my eyes at his dramatics and pull out my homework for the evening. I scurry over to the two of them in order to start on it, seeing as if I don't do it now, I won't do it at all.

Even after hearing such things from Ariel, I continue to worry about Raina. I feel that it's more about the fact that the two of them can so freely spend time together both on and off campus while I can't. That thought alone pushes me to send a text to Quinton, who I pray remains ignorant to how much control he has over my thoughts.

Aron: How's it going with Raina? I text him and seconds later get a reply.

Quinton: She talks too much, like someone else I know.

I grin at the speed of which he answered back. Was he possibly waiting for my text? I am pathetic, getting so excited about a freaking text. I'm so hopeless.

Aron: One of us has to since someone can't hold a conversation to save his life.

Quinton: I can. I simply choose which are worthy of my time.

Is he implying that I'm not worthy of his time? That dirty bastard! Before I know it, I've called him and I'm shouting into the phone, "My conversations are worthy of everyone's time! You best be honored to speak with someone as glorious as myself."

Langley whispers something like 'wasn't he supposed to be studying with us' to Ariel, who shakes her head with a smile.

"There is no need to shout. It will not change the fact that your conversations, like this one, for example, are utterly pointless," Quinton says.

I can hear his smirk. Oh, you know what, screw him! I don't care if he's bothered by something, he can solve his problem himself.

"If they are so pointless, why did you answer the phone?" I hiss.

"I thought I'd humor you."

For a moment, it feels like Quinton's back to normal. We exchange insults as we normally always do, joke about and hang up shortly after. I go to sleep thinking that tomorrow Quinton will be in a better mood, but when has Quinton ever done what I thought he would?

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CHAPTER FIVE

Quinton is still strange.

And I don’t mean that in the normal way that I do, like, he’s being stranger than he usually is. He’s normally sarcastic and a total ass, but he’s never snippy. He doesn’t bark at me for little things, or anyone for that matter, yet here he is, practically steaming mad at me for getting a spot of ketchup on the top of his notes. It isn’t even on any words, simply on the paper itself.

Raina stares wide-eyed at the boy, who glares at me as if I had just burned the whole damn notebook. I haven’t seen such a look in a while. I’ve come to terms with the fact that I rather not see it again.

“What is with you? It’s just a bit of ketchup,” I huff, wiping the condiment off the page to lick off my fingers. It’s not like anyone else is going to see his notes or grade them. Why is he acting so stingy about it?

“Try to eat properly, will you?” Quinton leans back in his seat, letting out a long, exasperated sigh. “And nothing is up with me.”

“Yeah, and I’m 7 feet tall,” I spit back. He gives me a look that tells me how mature he thinks I am, which isn’t very little, if anyone is curious.

Quinton ruffles his hair before returning to speaking with Raina about their project. They write a few notes, speaking of an experiment they plan on doing that makes absolutely no sense to me. They just started speaking of it today and I’m already lost. You’d think I’d be able to keep up since I’m here for the beginning, but nope, not even a bit.

“How do you two even understand anything you just said?” I laugh, looking between the two of them. Quinton doesn’t bring his eyes up off the paper and that bugs me. I kick him beneath the table in order to get a reaction from him. After a second kick, he sends me a narrowed glance before looking away.

What the hell? He’s hardly looked at me at all today!

“I actually enjoy chemistry,” Raina announces around a cheerful smile. “I like the projects, seeing how certain things will react with others.”

“Oh no, we have a mad scientist here,” I tease her. She giggles. The moment she does, Quinton shoots her the nastiest glare I’ve ever seen him give to anyone. It baffles me and I’m left kicking him beneath the table again to get him to stop before she notices.

Thankfully, he does, but now he’s being pissy and I can hear it through his tone, “We’re trying to work, Aron.”

“Ok, ok.” I hold up my hands in surrender. “I can leave, you know.”

“That’s not...” Quinton runs his hands over his face. His voice is muffled beneath his hands. “That’s not what I said.”

“Close enough,” I mumble, to which he opens his fingers enough to stare at me. The stare leaves my skin tingling, and I don’t know why.

Raina clears her throat, breaking the tension in order for the two to continue their smart people conversation. I’m left munching on my sandwich while wondering about Quinton’s new prissy nature. One second he’s acting like he doesn’t want me here and the next he’s basically telling me to stay. What does he want?

I’m mostly silent throughout the rest of our time together. I do my best not to get anything on Quinton’s notes since he’s freaking out over the littlest of things. Not to mention Raina has to continuously snap him out of a trance. I don’t know what he’s thinking about. Perhaps it’s the project, but he keeps staring off into space like he’s thinking long and hard about the secrets of the universe. Raina has to snap her fingers before his face in order to bring him back to earth.

It doesn’t stop there, though. Later that evening I’m meant to go to Quinton’s only to retrieve a text asking that he and Raina be left alone. Something about needing to concentrate on their project.

Aron: Aren’t you just worried she’ll be too busy fawning over me to concentrate on your project? Don’t worry Quinny, I won’t get in the way!

However, I don’t get the normally snarky reply.

Quinton: Seriously, Aron. We’re busy.

His text leaves me feeling dejected because, honestly, he’s never replied like that before. I thought he was teasing back, but…

Aron: Ok, my bad.

He never replies. I wait throughout the night for word from him. Half of me expected a good night text or something, but there’s nothing. I get nothing from him, so I work up the courage to text.

Aron: Goodnight.

I feel stupid after sending it. We don't normally send goodnight texts, maybe a 'talk to you later' or 'see you tomorrow.' I don't know, goodnight was never one of them. I fall asleep still waiting for the reply that never comes.

To make it worse, this behavior rolls on the entire week. I think I'm overreacting, possibly thinking too much into it, but…

Quinton is on edge to where it is noticeable to others even besides me. I know this because Ariel mentions to me she had seen him nearly get into a fight with another kid for some unknown reason. That doesn't happen. The only time Quinton has ever gotten into physical confrontations is with me. The fact that he is letting others get to him worries me enough to say there is something bothering him. I wish to know, but it's kind of hard to speak with him when he basically avoids me the rest of the week.

His behavior remains different and uncomforting the next few days. He hardly messages me or calls. By the end of the week, Quinton has yet to divulge what is making him that way. Not to mention now he's gone and changed his mind, seeming to not want me with him and Raina at all. I would have agreed if it didn't bother me so much. It wasn't like I was impeding their project. They were doing incredibly well by the sounds of it! Something was up and I knew that, but it has been basically impossible to talk to him about it!

Every time I have tried, something got in the way. First there's Raina, who seems to be around Quinton all the time. She pops up out of nowhere or she's with him during study hall or at his dorm to work on their project.

Then there's Taylor, who has been at the dorm more often too, since apparently he didn't need to tutor at the moment. Something about them

having other plans for the week. It’s his room, I know, but it still bugs me. Langley and Ariel willingly leave when I ask them, since they know that Quinton and I need to talk, but Raina and Quinton are always working on their project. He never comes to my dorm. She’s a fucking leech. I’m sorry, but I’m annoyed at this point!

Oh, but there’s more! Even when Raina wasn’t around or I requested Quinton come over to my dorm to talk, he avoids me. He has been freaking avoiding me like the bloody plague or rather avoids being alone with me. How can I not be concerned about that? He practically bolts the minute we’re left alone.

Texting definitely wasn’t helping, either. Whenever I tried to ask what was wrong, he’d either ignore me or threaten to block me. He actually blocked me once until I threatened him the next day that I’d tell Autumn. I am still laughing at how he looked at me in disbelief, not at all believing I’d be so cruel as to tell his crazy best friend that he was ignoring his boyfriend. He unblocked me immediately.

I knew I liked Autumn for a reason.

Anyway, I have gotten nowhere and still have absolutely no idea what it could be. Not to mention we haven’t kissed for a week! It’s so hard not to stare at his lips when I’m aching to touch them. He has the most seductive unconscious movements of anyone I have ever met. During my lunch, he’s constantly sitting there in thought, pencil resting against his bottom lip, said lips being slightly ajar and just begging to be ravished. He’ll flick out his tongue to run across them and every time I’m reminded of what exactly that tongue is capable of and what else I wish it would do.

Am I the only one bothered by this? He’s a normal teenager, so he should be as pent up as I am!

He is driving me nuts. I'm about to drag his ass out of class whether or not he wants me to and demand he tell me what's up because this is ridiculous. Then I will kiss him senseless, but that's after I get the truth out of him. Wait, maybe I should learn how to multitask in order to get both done at once? That sounds like the best plan.

The problem is that he's avoiding me, so I need to catch him off guard. I need to get him somewhere and at a time that he won't expect.

Being my ever so brilliant self, I attempt to interrogate Quinton between classes. The only time Raina isn't attached to the boy is when they aren't sharing a class, which basically says my only time to drag him out is in between classes! He hangs up on me if I try to talk over the phone or ignores my texts. I know that we will most likely miss our next class, but come on, Quinton can afford to miss a class. He's a genius! And I've been doing pretty well myself, so, fuck it, this is important! I wouldn't be bothering him about it if it weren't clear that something was wrong.

"What is up with you lately?" I ask, lingering beside a set of stairs after grabbing Quinton in the hall and pulling him there. He wasn't compliant at all either, huffing and tugging the whole way regardless of the stares we got.

When Quinton tries to brush past me, I take a step before him, blocking his path and pushing him into the corner. He does not like it. I know this by the glare he sets on me that is much colder than the ones I've been getting lately.

"Nothing is up with me," he replies in a steady voice that most would fall for. At a time, I would have too. He has his arms crossed in a defensive manner.

“Bull shit. You’re almost as bad as my mother when she’s on her period and without chocolate.” It’s a terrifying thing, let me tell you! That’s why we always, always have chocolate available.

“You’re so immature,” he bites back and, again, tries to step around me, but I won’t let it happen. I press my hand to his chest and he brushes it off coldly.

“How am I the immature one? You’re the one ignoring me and avoiding me every chance you get,” I point out, patting my phone that’s in my pants pocket for emphasis.

“I’m going to be late for class.” He sighs, again attempting to avoid this conversation.

He’s joking, right? Like he has to know how strange he’s acting and I’ve obviously caught on. Why won’t he tell me what’s up? He should know by now that hiding things from me will only make things worse.

“So what? You’re acing that class, I’m sure. This is more important,” I state.

“Is it?” He asks with an arched brow. Now he has a hand tangled in his hair as if he is attempting to soothe an oncoming headache. “How are you overreacting more important than class?”

“Overreacting?” I hiss. It’s taking everything in me not to shout. I take a deep breath, remind myself that we’re in the hall where others can hear and do my best to keep my words hardly above a whisper. “I am not overreacting. You’re acting super weird and don’t say that you aren’t.”

Quinton rolls his eyes, running his hands through his hair in agitation. He drops his arms, allowing them to swing at his sides as he throws his head back. “What is with you and your incapability to not bother others?”

“How is caring the same as bothering?” I cross my arms and glare just as intensely back. His rage is starting to fuel my own. We’re both glaring at one another now, neither backing down, and I realize that having two stubborn people in a relationship can cause some serious issues.

He practically spits back at me, “There’s nothing wrong.”

“If it was nothing, you wouldn’t be acting so snippy.” I point accusingly at him because, come on, he’s acting pretty snippy right now.

“Are you stressed out? Worried about something? I can help,” I insist, trying to put myself off as being more helpful than annoying. I know I can get pushy, but I really am concerned and only trying to help. I want him to know that and I hope he can see it, but...

“I said it’s nothing,” he states just as the bell signals to tell us we are both late for class. Now his eyes are practically bursting into flames from the intensity of his glare. “Stop acting so childish and drop it.”

“Childish? How is me being concerned childish?” I’m glad the bell rang because it’s basically impossible for me to keep my voice down now. Mostly everyone is in class. There are a few stragglers, but most are too busy running off to class to care about two boys arguing in a stairwell.

“You aren’t concerned. You’re just being nosy.”

I take a step back in astonishment before taking a menacing one forward. “Nosy? You’ve been avoiding being alone with me while constantly acting strange all week, and all you have to say is that I’m being nosy?”

He is pissing me off, and it seems I am pissing him off as well. He doesn’t apologize or take back what he said. Instead, he leans into it by repeating, “Yes, you’re being nosy.”

“Fine,” I hiss.

“Fine,” he spits back.

We stand there, facing one another, waiting for the other to walk away. Quinton's jaw is locked together in a stern expression. My jaw is pressed together so firmly that it makes my gums grow sore. It's as if we're waiting for the other to make another snarky remark or to continue the argument, but I don't know what else to say.

How can I be more clear that I am simply worried? How the hell am I the bad guy here? He's acting like I'm freaking five! I want to help. If he's stressed out or someone is messing with him, I want to help.

"Quinton, seriously..." I finally breathe out, dropping my hands onto his shoulders where I squeeze. "I want to help. Can't I?"

It physically hurts when he brushes my hands off and states firmly, "There's nothing to help with."

It hurts. It hurts enough that I have to take a step away. The feeling I have, I don't know how to explain it other than sickening. It's like he's saying he doesn't trust me or doesn't find me reliable. I open my mouth to voice this, but what comes out is much different from I intended, "Whatever, be that way then."

He says nothing, and he doesn't stop me from leaving. To be honest, that makes it worse. Once again, I am left hoping that he would talk to me, ask me to turn back around and let us fix whatever it is that's wrong. I had hoped one of us would simply get over ourselves and work on it. Instead, we go our separate ways, both fuming for what I'm assuming to be a stupid reason.

I actually hesitate at the end of the hall with the desire to turn around and head back or simply to look. However, I don't, and I regret it the rest of the way to my class. I'm lectured about being late, but I couldn't care less. Langley knows something is wrong the moment he lays eyes on me.

“What’s wrong?” he whispers.

“Whichever one of you bet we’d have a lovers’ quarrel the soonest is the winner,” I reply around a grunt before face planting into the desk. I’m done. I don’t feel like talking about it. I voice that to Langley, who tries to argue with my decision. I pull a Quinton move and ignore him.

The feeling of not being trusted is the worst feeling imaginable.

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CHAPTER SIX

The world operates in funny ways. When you don't want to see someone, you run into them all the time, but when you wish to see them, they're never around. Right now, I have no desire to see or speak to Quinton. That means we can't stop running into each other.

Langley stands at my side, switching his gaze between me and Quinton. It feels like the old days whenever Quinton and I would fight. We glare daggers at the other as if we expect someone to say something. Langley is like the innocent bystander caught in the crossfire, bouncing from one foot to the other impatiently. After about two minutes of Quinton and I battling it out through our eyes, Langley clears his throat, "You two should enter a professional staring competition. I bet you'd bring in the big bucks."

Thank goodness for Langley because his comment has us both finally looking away from each other to peer at him. However, Langley seems to regret speaking because now our heated gazes are focused on him. He

smiles sheepishly and mumbles, “Now I know how an ant feels beneath a magnifying glass, thanks. I’ve always wanted to know what that felt like, let me tell you.”

Quinton rolls his eyes and brings his gaze back to me. He narrows his eyes for a second before brushing past me.

“Jerk,” I grumble. He ignores me in order to continue down a path to wherever the hell he’s going.

“Well, ain’t this lovely,” Langley whistles, resting his elbow on my shoulder to grab my attention. “This fight you two are having is terrifying and I would very much appreciate it if you’d make up, like, soon.”

“We aren’t fighting,” I argue. Langley looks ready to back hand me for even attempting that pathetic argument. I groan. “It’s just a little...”

“Fight,” Langley finishes for me. “You two have been giving each other the stink eye, but at least neither of you have died yet. That’s quite impressive.”

“What is with you thinking we are going to kill each other?”

“Quinton will kill your ass one—” I punch Langley in the stomach before he finishes. He cackles at the blush he put on my face, then follows me to our next class. “Seriously though, why are you guys fighting?”

I don’t really know. Saying that we’re fighting because he doesn’t trust me or finds me unreliable isn’t quite right. I don’t know if that’s really the case or if, as Quinton said, I was just being nosy and overreacting. I’m thinking I was, or maybe I want to agree with him, so we’ll stop this nonsense.

“It’s complicated,” I reply.

“Yeah, well, I don’t want to be the sacrificial lamb, so if you could, like, I don’t know, maybe go suck his dick as a form of apology—”

“Who said it was my fault?!” I holler, looking at Langley, who grins far too happily might I add. Wait a second. “And I’m not sucking his dick,” I hiss, rubbing my knuckles into the side of his head.

Langley cackles. “Like you haven’t considered it, or have you already done it?”

“I will end you.”

“Quinton will end your virginity.”

“I’m showing Ariel your porn stash.” And you bet that shut Langley up real quick.

“Ok, ok in all seriousness, avoiding each other and glaring will not solve whatever the problem is. Even if it isn’t your fault, maybe you should talk to him?” Langley asks softly to show that he is actually being serious.

“Why do I have to be the one to go to him? Why can’t he come to me?” I ask, throwing my hand back to point behind us in the direction Quinton went, although he’s long gone by now.

“Because he’s Quinton. He will not change his ways overnight. You’re both stubborn jerks, but I’d have to argue that his case is worse than yours.”

Is it sad I feel proud about that? I’m not as stubborn as Quinton. It’s like saying I’m in better control over myself. Or Langley said that to make me feel proud. Either way, I smile upon hearing that and hum, “True. He’s a hardheaded bastard.”

“So you’re going to talk to him?” Langley asks, more like pleads, seeing as his life is what’s on the line during this fight.

I grumble, groan, and moan even after we reach class. The bell rings and I sink beneath the desk. With a huff, I answer, “Whatever, fine.”

“You’re growing up so fast. Should I take a picture to commemorate this moment?”

“You are unusually annoying today.”

“Thanks!”

I don’t work up the nerve to talk to Quinton today, though. I haven’t a clue what to say or what to even bring up. Last time I tried talking to him about what had buried itself up his ass, it resulted in our argument. I am sure if I go running to him with nothing on my mind, it’ll only result in another heated disagreement. I wrack my brain for what to say or ask. Nothing specific comes to mind, though.

I asked if he was stressed, but he kept saying he was ok, and nothing was wrong. Like Langley said and I’ve said myself, Quinton is stubborn. He doesn’t enjoy getting help from others and I guess I’m still considered an ‘other’. Why? Why am I not someone he can rely on? Why am I not someone he can trust? Have I not proven myself or something? Seriously, I don’t get it. I don’t get him.

Saturday rolls around before I notice; Quinton and I haven’t spoken since Wednesday. I haven’t messaged or called him. He hasn’t messaged or called me. I’m surprised Autumn hasn’t either, but that only means Quinton hasn’t told her anything. I don’t plan on telling her anything either. She’ll probably just say that we’re both being stubborn, which is very true, but whatever! I’m trying to think of something here.

I want to be the ‘good boyfriend’ who allows his partner their space. I want to be the ‘good boyfriend’ that’s supportive and caring. I don’t want it to seem like I’m nosy or demanding attention. However, perhaps Quinton sees me that way? I don’t know, but I haven’t come up with a damn thing to say. All I know is, we have to talk about something, anything!

I get out of my bed, determined to speak with Quinton. Langley has been gone since morning, so I have no one to give me a boost of confidence or

words of advice. I simply throw on my clothes and march on over to Quinton's dorm.

I get the feeling Raina will be there, seeing as she has been stuck to him like glue. If she is, I'll tell her that Quinton and I need to talk and request that they work another day.

I head over with as much courage as I can muster and knock on the door. Taylor is there more often now, so it'd be rude if I walked in without notice. It's also the weekend. He could be at the dorm, lounging about doing absolutely nothing, or he could be out in town hanging out with friends. No one answers the door, though. Maybe Quinton's in the shower?

I pull out my phone, ready to call Quinton whenever I see him and Raina making their way down the hall. Quinton has a bag in his hand as does Raina, meaning they went into town together again. My blood boils. Raina has her arm wrapped around his. She's practically super glued to his side. The fuck is she doing? The fuck is he doing? Why is he letting her do that? Sorry, over acting a bit because of withdrawal. Is it withdrawal or pent up frustration from knowing something is up and having no answers? Most likely the latter, seeing as we are having an argument, fight, whatever you want to call it.

Here I am, fretting over how to fix this while Quinton's off with Raina. Since when were they so chummy because last I checked, Quinton has been annoyed with her, yet they seem pretty happy right now, what with her giggling and clinging to him like that. I'm not even allowed to cling to him like that, and I'm dating the bastard! Not that I want to cling to him or anything. I'm just saying that if I'm not allowed, then she isn't allowed!

My anger must be showing because when the two reach me Raina's eyes grow wide and she asks, "Aron?"

She doesn’t remove her arm. Not that she knows what she’s doing, but the bastard could at least shake it off!

“Raina,” I plaster on a smile that must be horrifying because the girl finally removes her arm from Quinton’s. “Could you and Quinton skip a night? He and I need to have a little heart to heart.” I jab the boy in the chest with my elbow more roughly than I need to, which Raina probably notices.

“Uh, we’re meant to start our experiment,” Raina explains, holding up the bag she has in her hands and gesturing to the one in Quinton’s.

“You two have a while to work on it. I’m sure you can afford a day,” I insist, trying not to hiss out my words. It’s not her fault, but seeing her with him puts me on edge. Am I the only one who gives a damn if we make up?

Perhaps not because Quinton lets out a sigh, stopping Raina from possibly arguing with me and says, “We’ve got time, Raina. We’ll work on it another day.”

The girl looks at Quinton in disbelief, then faces me. “I guess we can finish our project another day,” she says. “I’ll call you.”

Call?

Something inside me snaps. I don’t even hear whatever more the two say to each other. It isn’t until I’m inside Quinton’s room that I realize Raina is gone. My jaw hurts from how hard I’m gritting my teeth. My hands ache from how hard I’m fisting them.

Quinton leans against his desk, looking back at me. He isn’t glaring like me, but staring blankly as if the glare doesn’t bother him. I suppose it doesn’t, the heartless piece of shit.

“She has your number?” I ask. Any ideas or thoughts I had before hearing that have vanished. If I had any idea how to start our ‘makeup talk’, they’re

gone now.

When he nods, I feel worse. I knew Quinton for nearly two years before I got his number. Hell, we made out before I got his number, but Raina received his number in a few days? And she's hanging all over him like a lovesick puppy. It really bugs me, more than I'm okay with, and I feel like shit, but my mind is so frazzled.

"Why does she have your number?" I ask.

"Not that it's any concern of yours, but it's because we're chemistry partners. We need to talk about our project," he replies.

"None of my concern? How isn't it my concern? I'm your boyfriend." Wow, I actually said that out loud. I'd be freaking out, but I'm too busy freaking out about something else. I shall make a note to frantically panic over it later.

"I'm allowed to speak with other people, Aron." He pushes himself off the desk to take a step into my personal space. "You're overreacting."

"Am I?" I take a step back from him since I don't like that he's so close. He's literally looking down on me, and that pisses me off. Raina is bothering me. The fight is bothering me. This fight is bothering me. The feeling of not being trusted is bothering me. Everything is bothering me.

"You're avoiding me. We haven't talked in days. We're fighting and you don't care. She's been hanging all over you like a lovesick puppy and you haven't bothered to brush her off. Now I learn you have her number, you, the most antisocial asshole to ever walk this earth, so do explain how I'm overreacting, because it's pretty fucking clear that something is up!"

"You're overreacting." He reiterates.

"And you're repeating yourself! The fuck Quinton? Why can't you trust me a bit? Am I that unreliable? Do you think so little of me?"

“I never said that,” he actually quickly says back, annoyed that I even thought such a thing, but how could I not?

“You sure are acting like it, like I’m not trustworthy or reliable or of any help to you. I mean, what’s going on? I mean... are you and...” Panic sets in. Memories of all the people in my life and how basically every one wishes to stab me in the back. I remember being younger and listening to my parents tell me that some people appear on your side when they aren’t.

An idea comes to mind, one that makes me sick. He’s messing with me, isn’t he? Perhaps this is payback for all the times I’ve messed with him. Did he plan all this? When he found out I liked him, he screwed with my head, then toss me to the side like trash? Shit, he’s cheating on me. Would it be called cheating if he planned it to begin with?

No way. Quinton wouldn’t cheat on me, would he? He wouldn’t trick me like that, right? Quinton is so uptight. He never seemed like the kind of guy to cheat, but there’s exactly where my mind has gone. I have officially spiraled into an abyss that continues carrying me deeper and deeper into thoughts that leave my stomach churning. I don’t know if I can handle this. Fuck, there’s no way. Suddenly I feel itchy all over, like I want to physically scratch away such thoughts. I want to dig deep into my skin and rip the problem from the roots.

“Stop,” he says, breaking me from my mental freak out.

I don’t know what I’m supposed to be stopping until Quinton moves towards me. He grips my cheeks; forces me to look him straight in the eye, and I wonder if he knows what crazy ideas are running through my head.

“Are you and Raina—” Before I can finish, there’s a pair of lips cutting me off. I get the feeling that, yeah, he figured out what I was thinking. I would push him away, but my sanity is already teetering on the edge, so it

completely falls and shatters the moment his tongue presses past my lips. Hey, it's been days since I've gotten any physical contact from him, so excuse me if my mental stability is thrown out the window the moment we kiss.

The kiss is long and frustrating, full of nips and sucks and tugging of hair, but when we pull apart, I'm breathless and my mind is blank, giving Quinton time to speak.

"I'm not cheating on you," he says against my lips and, damn him, because I was just getting the ability to think back, but he went and did that, so now my brain is mush again.

"You aren't messing with me, either?" I ask. To be honest, that's worse than cheating. I'd rather he cheat. I'd rather he do anything other than that. It'd be like throwing reality into my face, the reality that I can trust no one.

Quinton furrows his brows in agitation. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Payback," I answer, hardly above a whisper. I brush his hands off of me, except he now throws his hand over my shoulders to pull me into an embrace. I flush at the hug that he initiated. Quinton doesn't hug, although he should because he's good at hugging, too.

I cling to his shoulders, refusing to accept that I'm shaking when I whimper, "If you're trying to mess with me or something—"

"I'm not. I'm really not, Aron. I'm pissed you'd even think that," he admits, sounding upset, but I don't think he's upset at me.

"What else am I supposed to think?"

"You asked why I can't trust you a little," he hums as he pulls away far enough to look down at me. "It seems you don't trust me very much, either."

Well, yeah, he’s being secretive! But also ouch. I can’t help it. I’m in emotional turmoil at the moment, so excuse me.

“There’s something up and you won’t tell me and it’s pissing me off. How am I supposed to feel or help if I don’t even know what’s wrong?” I argue. He should know I need step-by-step instructions on what to do in a situation such as this.

Quinton pulls away, allowing me the ability to think once again. Honestly, if he ever finds out what he does to me when we’re in close proximity, I will never live it down. Unless perhaps he knows and is only using his power when he really needs to!

“It’s nothing I can’t handle,” Quinton says and takes a seat on his bed, meaning there is something going on. I wasn’t overreacting or being nosy. He pats the space beside him, which I take while grumbling something about my legs being tired. He rolls his eyes but says nothing about it.

“You don’t need to concern yourself with it. I can handle it, I swear,” he says.

“But—”

“But if you wish to help, then do this—” Oh no, he’s leaning in again. My brain has hitched a ride to La-la land. My eyes flutter closed as he grows closer to breathe the next part against my lips. “Stay here.”

“Huh?” What exactly does he mean by that? Stay here, as in his room right now, or as in beside him, like, metaphorically? Physically? I don’t know. All that seems to be on my mind is the desire to take those lips and make them emit sounds I dare not let any others hear.

“Just stay here,” he says again before finally, thank god, pressing his lips against mine. He entangles his hand in my hair and angles himself for a deeper kiss that sends any thoughts of stopping out of my mind. It isn’t until

my lungs ache he pulls away, grinning at the damage he has done. I'm breathy and aroused, and it's all his damn fault, but honestly, he isn't much better. His lips are swelling the same as mine and, though he hides it better, his chest is heaving along with his breaths.

"If I can help Quinton, I will. You know that, right?" Because he needs to know that I'm here. Even if he bugs the hell out of me and I say I hate him more often than not, I am here for him. If he needs my help, if there's any way to make things better, I will do it and he needs to know that.

"I know. Just trust me and don't worry about it." He leans back onto his pillows, eyes shut like he's going to take a nap. "Taylor is out for the weekend, so stay here tonight."

Like, stay in his dorm room? Alone? With him? My cheeks are feeling hot again.

"But I need to sign back into my dorm." I argue, though deep down I would rather stay here.

"Tell Langley to do it for you."

"Since when did you disobey the rules?" I laugh, leaning back the same as him. I turn to my side so I can face him and watch as he breathes slowly in and out.

"Or don't. I don't care." He shrugs, his eyes remaining closed.

With a pout, I huff. "You're no fun."

I text Langley 5 minutes later to ask him to sign me back into the dorms.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

So maybe I jump Quinton seconds after text Langley and maybe he stares up at me smugly with a cocked brow. I don't know if the smug expression is from my obvious desire for something to happen or the fact that I have moved from his side to his lap. I don't really want to be in your lap either, asshole! I'd much rather he be in my lap.

"Want something, Your Highness?" He asks, now leaning up onto his elbows. The way his eyelids hang half-mast makes my cock twitch, an action that he notices, seeing as his eyes drag themselves down my body towards the movement. Upon seeing that I'm already reacting to something so simple, he chuckles. "How needy."

"Shut up! We have done nothing for, like, a week," I grumble, taking him by the shirt and pulling him roughly towards me to crash our lips together. I can't deny that my heart skips at the feeling of warm lips reacting to my own. Ever moving, opening and closing as a tongue teasingly runs over my

lips before retreating to its own cavern. Growing annoyed with his smirk that I can feel against my lips, I take his bottom lip between my teeth, biting it as punishment. He doesn't seem to mind.

Quinton sits up; one of his arms wraps around my waist, using the hold to press our bodies together. As I'm pushing off his blazer and reaching to unbutton his shirt, his hands run down to cup my ass. We only pull apart in order to remove not only his but also my shirt. They are soon forgotten somewhere in the bedroom. Quinton's lips roam the expanse of my neck, finding new ways to evoke a reaction from me. My hips thrust down into his because of a particular suck to my collarbone.

I feel that our play is affecting him as much as it is me. His erection presses against me. Not that I am much better since I'm currently rubbing against his stomach. The fabric of my pants is irritating. I hiss at the friction they're creating. Quinton, probably being as uncomfortable in these stuffy pants as me, moves his hands from my ass to the front to undo the damn things. I'm quick to move off the bed, tugging at Quinton, ever eager to get those damn pants off him. He chuckles—not needed—and I growl while quickly tugging at the button that doesn't seem to want to come off.

"So impatient," he breathes against my ear. The hot breath sends a sensation that goes straight to my groin. Freaking bastard!

"Shut up!" I hiss.

Finally, I get his pants off. His boxers are now the only barrier between his throbbing erection and me. I glare at the cloth, as if that would somehow get rid of them in order for me to see what I desire. Quinton tugs on my pants. I'm relieved when the way too hot fabric pulls around my ankles. I kick the unnecessary garment away and return to running my hands all across the body that is making my breathing heavy.

Quinton does the same; one hand rests on my neck, rubbing soothing circles with his thumb while the other hand cups me through my boxers. I grunt at the first touch my cock has gotten from him in a week. Just feeling him rub the fabric is enough to make my legs shake. I'm pretty sure even if Taylor were to walk in right now, I wouldn't stop. There is no way in hell I am not getting off with him.

I press my hands against his chest and push him back onto the mattress. He is, strangely enough, not resisting and sits on the bed. I'm not even sure what it is I want to do until I've gotten to my knees. I can't see the look on Quinton's face as I am too busy sucking and nipping at the inside of his thigh. Maybe he's staring at me like a madman, or maybe he is too aroused to even care that I am so willing to suck him off. I can't even believe I'm doing this, but the only thing on my aroused mind is seeing Quinton as a complete mess because of me. That thought alone is what drives me to tug at his boxers, insisting that he remove the damn things so I can do as I please. He doesn't resist, instead pushing himself up far enough to allow me to pull the boxers off his legs.

If my cheeks aren't red enough already, they become even more so when I see his erection before me. I bite my lip, feeling slightly embarrassed. I don't know what I'm doing. How the hell do I know if I can even do this? However, when I shyly look up to see Quinton, the normally composed, apathetic, and cold Quinton, not only looking down at me with obvious excitement, lust and nerves, but also blushing the lightest shade of pink ever created, it makes it all worth it.

I nod as if to tell him I'm going for it, or maybe I nod to tell myself I'm going for it. Either way, I tear my eyes away from the lust filled gaze to focus on the task at hand. I gag myself when I take too much of him

between my lips on the first try. Quinton curses the moment my lips encase him. At first, I squeeze my eyes shut tight in embarrassment, praying that he hadn't noticed that idiotic mishap. He says nothing though and grips my shoulder with an intense force.

In my dreams, this was easy. It was natural, and we just knew what to do. Not now. I can't really think. My mind's numb while my body's too hot. Feeling his arousal throbbing between my lips actually makes me twitch shamefully. My breathing is shaky as I attempt to breathe through my nostrils to continue my ministrations against him. I try doing what I have seen in porn or what I would enjoy. I use my tongue to run around him and suck at his tip. Quinton attempts to thrust upwards, and it makes me curious enough to look up. My eyes widen at the sight that not only leaves me breathless, but actually makes my erection throb.

I've never seen Quinton so obviously affected by anything. He can't hide the obvious arousal etched across his flushing face. His breathing is heavy, chest rising and falling with his erotic breathing. Lust and want are all I see within obsidian eyes that normally reveal nothing. Beneath my arm, I feel his body trembling. Beside me, his thighs shake. The idea that I'm the reason he's a hot mess is enough to coax me to continue, though now I am keeping my eyes on him.

Watching the way he bites his lips to keep back a groan or how he throws his head back in pleasure encourages me. Seeing his chest heaving and body shaking because of my mouth wreaking havoc on him makes my entire body shiver. Hearing his grunts, his groans, and the occasional slip of my name makes me moan.

It isn't until his body tenses that I realize how close he is. Now his hips are desperately trying to move beneath my hold. He can't keep back his

groans. He grips my hair so painfully I almost pull away, but his very rare sharp cry tells me he's close. A few more sucks against his tip and Quinton's orgasm rocks him. I don't know how anyone swallows without coughing or feeling totally embarrassed. Heat pulls beneath my cheeks that lessen only a smidge when I look up at Quinton to see his heaving chest and flushed face.

"You damn near pulled my hair out, asshole," I grumble, squirming in place because my erection continues to throb with need.

"But I didn't," he says breathlessly.

Ha! Finally, he sounds breathless for once. It's normally only me. My thoughts of victory are interrupted when the boy grabs me by the arm and tosses me onto the bed. I shout, but that shout turns into a groan when Quinton returns the favor.

I don't know how to explain the heat encasing me, only that it's mind boggling. Pure pleasure hissing through my veins, making my toes curl and heels dig into the mattress. I wonder if Quinton feels as embarrassed or as anxious as I did, but the soft touch of his tongue against my tip has all my thoughts disappearing. There's only him, the feeling of his hand grasping my base and his mouth sucking me off. I almost can't believe this is real, that Quinton is doing this to me or that we're capable of feeling this good.

I'm way more vocal than him, which I should have seen coming, but that kind of pisses me off. I feel him smirking against my thigh when he dares to pull away. He kisses the trembling skin, lingering there for a long moment like the bastard he is. My fingers tear into the blankets, trying to hold on to reality when his lips suck my tip and I see white. He moves faster, probably knowing from the soft cries of his names that I'm close. There's white furious fire in my veins, all twisting within my stomach to make my legs

shake, then my orgasm rolls over me in waves. The very definition of pleasure hitting me with such force that I can't breathe and I'm left laying listless on the bed.

I shiver when Quinton kisses my neck. He rests his warm body against mine. My arms instinctually wrap around him, which I'll complain about later. Right now, I don't want to leave him or risk pointing out how gently he holds me, how he tugs me into his chest and wraps our legs together. It's nice like this, just basking in each other's company after something so intense.

Sunday morning I awake in a mess of blankets and tangled limbs. Some time during the night Quinton and I rolled the comforter around us. How did we even do this? Where the hell are my body parts? Which are mine, and which are his? I swear it's all him because I have never got myself stuck in a blanket before! He must roll like a freaking tsunami in his sleep and somehow drag me with him.

I do not know whose legs are protruding from the bottom of our cocoon. I have to wiggle my toes to decipher where my body and his are. Ok, found my feet. Now, where is the rest of my body? He's lying on my arm, which has fallen asleep. I do my best not to make any noises as I drag it out from under him.

The pins and needles stabbing at my arm makes me throw my head back with the desire to let out some form of 'ah.' Honestly, it's hard not to make a sound when half your body is tingling. Even after I remove my arm from beneath the beast, I can't get out. He has both his arms around me and his face buried in my chest.

Holy shit, this is bad because he looks cute. Quinton doesn't do cute, but lately he's been pretty cute around me. He is the opposite of cute though,

yet here is, being so fucking cute that I'm wondering if it's really him. Where did he go? Is he taking a shower? I look behind me to see no one else in the room or in the bathroom, so this is definitely him. Looking down at the slumbering boy, whose mouth is slightly ajar and hair a total mess, a devious plot comes to mind. Where the hell is my phone?

Spinning my head around the room, I find my phone on the desk that is barely in reach. I do my best to pull away slightly in order to grab my phone, desperately trying not to chuckle as I snap pictures from every angle.

However, I fail and let out a roar of laughter that not only stirs the boy awake but also shakes the both of us. These pictures are great! I got one where there's obviously some drool coming out the side of his mouth. Before Quinton has time to comprehend what's happening, I am sending the pictures to Autumn for safe keeping. Quinton groans and blinks once, twice before removing his arms from around me to rub at his crusted eyes. Grumbling, he asks, "What the hell did you do?"

I can't help but laugh at how he automatically assumes my laughter is from something I did. Even half awake, Quinton is smart because his tired eyes land on the phone in my hand. I smile sheepishly at the way his eyes narrow into a glare, one that is much worse than his others seeing as this one he has made, not only from being annoyed by my antics but the fact that he has just been woken up. Normal Quinton glare? Yes, that's scary. Just got up and is now mad at my glare? That's fucking terrifying. You have not felt fear until you have seen Quinton's glare after waking.

"Hand it over," he orders, holding out his hand for the device that I cradle to my chest. He is practically shooting lasers from his eyes.

“No. It’s my phone!” I shake my head frantically, now trying to pull away, but the blanket is still tangled around my feet. Quinton, knowing that, grabs me and pulls me closer, now throwing his legs around me to keep me locked in place. I shout all forms of curse words as we battle for my phone.

It is not a very long battle nor am I even close to winning, but damn it, I just woke up and it’s not fair! He freaking leans down to kiss me with his nasty morning breath that leaves me gasping and not in a good way. He knew that would work too because now he has my phone while I try to wipe his taste away with the back of my hand.

“You’re...” He shakes his head as he looks through my recent pictures. I laugh at the look of disbelief he sends me as he continues, “So immature.”

“What? Like you wouldn’t have snapped sleep pics of me!” I shout, pointing at the boy who gives me a look that states he sure as hell wouldn’t and I realize that no, he wouldn’t. So what, he doesn’t know what funny is, freaking has no sense of humor, asshole.

“Whatever,” I huff, kicking the blankets off my legs. “Delete them if you want, but...”

My phone begins to buzz, and Quinton’s face becomes dark. Interested in what came in, I peek over his shoulder to see Autumn’s reply that is full of happy emojis and words such as ‘too cute’ and ‘I am going to save all of these.’ Now I feel those lasers being pointed at me once again. I look at Quinton to find his most hate filled gaze locked on me.

“I sent them to Autumn already,” I say, throwing my head back as I laugh maniacally.

“I can see that,” he hisses and doesn’t bother deleting the pictures, seeing as Autumn has them. We both know she will never delete such prized possessions, either. I can see the wheels turning in his head in hopes of

discovering a way to find the girl's phone, delete all the pictures, and erase her memory. So far, it seems he's come up with nothing.

I crawl out of bed, somehow feeling perfectly ok with using the jerk's bathroom without his consent. I look through the bathroom for an extra toothbrush. Thankfully, I find an entire pack of them and steal the blue one that, when Quinton sees after entering the bathroom, says, "Typical."

"The hell you mean typical?" I ask before violently scrubbing at my pearly whites.

"Blue," Quinton answers, pointing at the toothbrush and mimicking me by brushing his teeth. I want to slap him at how he seems to purposely take his time, brushing slowly and almost methodically. He's a freaking overachiever while brushing his teeth too? I should have figured.

"What?" I ask before spitting the paste into the sink then proceeding to wash out my mouth. After feeling thoroughly clean, I smile into the mirror, admiring the smile, then looking back to Quinton, who is still brushing. "Should I have grabbed the pink one?"

After finishing, Quinton leans up from the sink to reply around a smirk. "Would have suited you better, Princess."

"I fucking hate you, you know that, right?"

Quinton brushes past me, choosing not to answer. I watch as he opens the curtains to the shower before turning it on and testing the water with his fingertips. I flush when the boy looks back at me to ask, "You going to watch me shower?"

"N-No!" I quickly shout, turning to run out of the bathroom, now realizing that he had taken a set of clothes in there with him. I shut the door behind me, then decide on playing some games while he showers. Once he's done, I take one of my own.

“So, what are we going to get up to today?” I ask after emerging from the shower. I flush at the sudden realization that not only am I wearing some of Quinton’s borrowed clothes, but I even smell like the bastard. I shouldn’t be surprised. I’m wearing his clothes, slept in his bed, and used all his bathroom supplies. Still, the smell that seems to encircle me makes my heart race.

Quinton looks over the top of the book he has in his hands to show an arched brow. “We?”

“Yeah, we.” I throw my hand back and forth between us. “It’s Sunday. Let’s get into something!”

“Get... into something?” Quinton’s eyes actually show that he has no clue what I mean.

“You know, like, watch a movie together or go play some sports or—” I have to stop myself when I get the desire to ask to go out into town. For a second, I forgot we couldn’t without an army following us. It wouldn’t be very date-like when we can’t even do anything because of the eyes that will be glued to me the whole time. My shoulders slump at our limited list of options. Honestly, the list is so short I can count them on my fingers. My mind shoots at me that Quinton and Raina can go out all they want.

I shake my head to disperse those thoughts. No, no, it doesn’t matter! The campus has plenty of activities for students to get into but it’s not exactly equipped with what one would like to do on a date. Not that I’m asking to go out on a date or anything! Just, we’re boyfriends so it’s fine to do date-like things. Not to mention we can’t really hold hands or kiss on campus with so many eyes to see.

Before I drown myself in my own thoughts, Quinton sighs and gets up. The bed squeaks as he does so and my eyes remove themselves from where

they seemed to be glued to the floor to him. He heads to his wardrobe to grab clothes suitable for the outside world.

“Fine,” he says.

“Fine?” I ask, watching the boy pull out jeans and a t-shirt.

Quinton nods but doesn’t elaborate further. I thought I’d have to battle with him a bit but it seems not. A small sliver of my mind thinks that, perhaps, Quinton is a mind reader. Could he clearly see how bothered I was and, rather than fighting like he usually would, agreed in order to make me happy? I snort at the thought, but...

Without meaning to, I smile from ear to ear and excitedly exclaim that I am going to run back to my dorm to change into some clothes of my own. Regardless of why he agreed, I’m excited nonetheless. Our options, though limited, are better than nothing. Quinton nods as he changes and shakes his head at me when I bolt out the door, saying to meet me outside my dorm in about fifteen minutes.

Just a few minutes after arriving at my dorm, I get a text from Quinton saying that it may take him a bit longer. I growl, angrily text back questions that he just replies to with the word; busy. Huffing, I wait for him to text me when he’s ready, which is like an hour later! What the hell was he doing the whole time? I look at the text sent to me saying to dress warmly and to meet him at the front gates. Warmly? Front gates? What the hell is he planning?

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CHAPTER EIGHT

I find myself in front of the front gates with Quinton, who is as layered in his clothing as I am. It's fairly sunny out with a slight chill in the air, but it certainly isn't cold enough for what we're wearing. What we're wearing is worthy of winter, not spring.

Outside the front gates are four cars that I recognize instantly. They are the vehicles used to escort my family and I as are the men located outside and within them. Each man is dressed in suits with a single wire reaching from their ears to hide beneath their collars. I recognize all of them as guards from campus. I'm immediately curious why they're here and why we're walking towards them.

"Quinton, what are we doing?" I ask.

He ignores me completely, choosing to walk to the cars in silence. He opens the door to one vehicle and gets in, beckoning me to follow with his hand. For a moment, I'm tempted not to, but with so many eyes looking at

me, I rather not have, as Langley would call it, a ‘lovers’ quarrel.’ Huffing, I jump into the car, copying Quinton and buckling my seat belt before the driver asks if we are set to go.

“Yes,” Quinton answers before me, to which I glare at him for.

“I would be if someone told me what we’re doing,” I hiss into his ear.

“You said you wanted to get into something,” Quinton sighs, as if I’m bothering him, which I suppose I am. I always am. With Quinton, it’s impossible not to bother him. “So we’re getting into something.”

“Off campus?” I ask. A second later my eyes widen. “My dad! He’s going to be so pissed!”

“I called him, dumbass,” Quinton says while looking at me, who was about ready to tear out their hair. “Technically, I called your mother to talk to him.”

“You called my mom in order to talk my dad into letting me off campus?” I ask with a grin that only grows in size when he nods. “You sneaky little shit,” I laugh, poking at the boy’s side continuously until he swats my hand away with an annoyed scoff.

“Wait, you have my mom’s number?” I inquire, trying to think back to a time where I had given it to him only to remember that I hadn’t.

“She put it in my phone over spring break under...” Quinton pulls out his phone and scrolls through the names to show me. I laugh uncontrollably when I see she had put herself under Momma Cora. Leave it to my mom to steal Quinton’s phone in order to put her name in under something that Quinton would clearly never call her.

“I felt it’d be rude to change it,” he says with a sigh as he looks at the name that has me nearly in tears while he looks at a loss, for once. It must be a family thing. It seems we stump the usually composed Quinny.

“So she talked my dad into allowing us off campus?” I don’t see why I ask, since the answer is obvious. We’re already off campus, driving through streets that if I were left on I’d get lost in. I haven’t been so far into town before and I doubt I ever will be enough to memorize them.

Quinton nods. “With a catch, of course.” He gestures his head towards the cars behind and in front of us. We have about fifteen security guards with us. I’m grateful Quinton doesn’t seem to mind. Something tells me, if it were someone else, they’d be beyond nervous with so many armed men stalking them like a hawk.

“So, where are we going?” I whistle, peering out the windows to hopefully get an idea where we are headed. So far I’ve got no idea, no shocker there.

“Some place you’ve never been,” Quinton replies and smirks at my pout. That is a lot of places, so he hasn’t exactly narrowed down the list.

“Asshole.”

“Princess.”

I don’t bother that with a response. Instead, I fall back into the seat, making myself comfortable for the last fifteen minutes before we find ourselves in front of a large building. Quinton was right. This is something I’ve never done before.

“We’re going ice skating?” I question with a tone of disbelief and excitement. I’m jumping out of the car before Quinton can answer and stare up at the building that reads The Frozen Ring. So that’s why he said to dress warmly.

“We’re going ice skating!” I shout and, like a five-year-old, run for the front doors.

I don’t bother waiting for Quinton, knowing that he will make it in at his own leisurely pace. I fling open the doors in order to run inside to find a large retro room full of arcade games, blue and white striped booths, tiled floors and a place to order food. To my left, I see a pair of gray doors leading to what I’m assuming is the ice skating rink. As I suspected, there are even more guards here, searching the place to make sure it is clear. So in total there are about twenty-five guys, like I said, an army.

I hear a voice call out to me, “Hello, Your Highness! We’re honored to have you visiting us today.”

I pivot on my heel to inspect where the voice came from. A woman with wrinkled features and graying brown hair stands behind the counter of the restaurant with a warm and welcoming smile. I smile back and answer, “Thanks for having me on such short notice.”

“Oh, it is not a problem!” She says with a courteous bow that makes me nervously laugh. I know they must have shut the place down to everyone but me for the day. My dad wouldn’t allow me here otherwise. However, I am sure Dad sent her a hefty fee in order to do so, seeing as she’s losing an entire day’s worth of customers.

Quinton walks past me and to the counter where he orders food while removing his heavy jacket. I huff at the bastard who started ordering without bothering to ask if I was hungry. My stomach growls loudly, signaling that I am indeed hungry, but he could at least ask! However, I follow him in order to get myself some food too that the owner, at least I think she is, says is free for the both of us. Sure, ‘free’ she says.

I thank her anyway and take a seat in one of the booths with Quinton across from me. The guards are finishing up searching the place, though I don’t know why they bother. No one was informed of my trip here. I doubt

there would be anyone setting up traps or the like. Once finished, they get food too and sit on the opposite end of the room to which I am thankful for. Just because I'm used to them being up my ass all the time doesn't mean I want them to be.

"Uh, thanks Quinton for, you know, getting us off campus," I mumble, quickly stuffing my face with food as an excuse not to talk. My cheeks feel warm regardless of the slight chill out here. I pray Quinton thinks the blush is from the cold.

I suppose I don't ask my father such requests because I feel it will bother him. He must feel guilty, must feel bad that I cannot partake in everything that others do. I don't want to rub it into his face that I'm not having a 'normal' teenage experience. Quinton, on the other hand, knows and is fine to be followed by an army of men eying us constantly. I don't know what he said to my folks in order to get them to agree, but I'm glad he did it.

Quinton shrugs and looks at me with a blank expression. "You looked like a kicked puppy earlier."

"Huh?" I ask with a mouth full of food that makes the boy across from me grimace.

"Earlier," he says, sighing, and shoving a handful of napkins in my face. I grumble about how annoyingly proper he is but wipe my face. "You said you wanted to get into something, then did that—" he waves his hand at me. "Sad puppy face."

"Yeah, well, we can't exactly do what other couples do now, can we?" I whisper more to myself than him.

Quinton either chooses not to reply to that or is unsure of how to. Knowing him, it's probably the first. After we finish our food, we get a pair of skates before entering the gray doors that I spotted earlier to walk into a

freezing cold room. The sudden change in temperature makes me shiver, but the shiver is partially because of excitement. I've never been ice-skating. Speaking of which...

"How did you know I've never been ice-skating?" I ask while putting on my skates. A few of the guards circle the area; though they have already checked it, I suppose they checked it again.

I bite my lip while looking at the skates that are now secured on my feet. My imagination runs wild, thinking over whether the blades can somehow come up through the shoes and slice through my feet. Gruesome thoughts. Can you stop and let me enjoy this? I don't feel like putting up with you!

"Your mom told me," Quinton replies, standing on his skates as if he is a pro. I glare at him like the asshole that he is.

"I swear to god if you're good at skating—"

"It shouldn't shock you. I excel at so many things," he says smugly, waiting for me to get up and humiliate myself, seeing as I have never been ice-skating or even rollerblading for that matter. This is going to be a disaster.

But if Quinton can do it, I can do it! Is what I think as I push myself up, only to tip over and fall flat on my face. Growling into the ground, I push myself up to look back at Quinton, whose smirk says everything. His eyes sparkle with amusement when he asks, "Not much of an Ice Princess, are we?"

"You realize I have blades on my feet, right? I will cut you with them," I threaten him, grabbing onto the bench beside me in order to help me up. I wobble pathetically towards the entrance of the rink. Quinton is right behind me. I swear I see his hands waiting at his side as if in order to catch me should I fall again. I have to bite my lip to hold back a smile.

The two of us make it onto the rink and immediately I slip, slamming my eyes shut as the world begins to turn, only to have it all stop when a pair of warm arms catch me. I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding and open my eyes to find Quinton eying me from above.

"Try hard not to suck so bad," he says, pushing me back onto my feet.

I wave my arms wildly beside me, making all kinds of strange noises from 'ooh' to 'aaah' while Quinton holds onto the back of my jacket. He uses his hold to steer me back or forward or from side to side when I lean a way I shouldn't. The world is so topsy-turvy that I'm feeling sick.

"Take me to the side, the side, damn it!" I shout as my feet continuously slide across the slippery ice. I nearly scream when my legs part too far for me to handle. I can't do a split for fuck's sake, save me! Quinton kindly does as I demand and pushes me to the side of the rink where I grip the bars and desperately attempt to learn how to stand.

Quinton, on the other hand, is perfectly fine, standing beside me as if we aren't on thin blades on ice. I take deep breaths to calm myself. My legs keep shaking. I don't have a clue if that's from the fear of falling, the cold, or both. I take a chance to let go, only to feel myself tipping backwards. I fling myself back at the bar and rest my elbows against it to keep me up.

I keep imagining myself falling to slam my head against the ice. The idea of busting my skull open is not on my to do list, thanks! Maybe this is why I've never gone skating before. It's fucking terrifying! What if I slip and fall? What if the blade comes through my shoe? Can it do that? There are blades on my feet, dude! That's not right.

"You won't fall," Quinton reassures me after about ten minutes of me clutching at the bars while mentally panicking and envisioning terrifying situations. I remove my eyes from my gloved hands that hold the bar with a

painful force to Quinton, who moves flush against me. His chest rests against my arm. He leans in close to whisper against my ear, “I won’t let you fall.”

Part of me wonders if it’s only the skating he is speaking about when he says that.

Hesitantly, I nod and hold out my hand that he takes, and then the other. He pushes off the wall, pulling me along with him. I groan pathetically and stare at our feet; how his are so calm and moving with such ease while mine desperately squirms in an attempt to find the right footing.

“Stop freaking out,” Quinton orders with a roll of his eyes though the corners of his mouth twitch with the desire to smirk.

“Easy for you to say! You’re not the one who could fall and crack your skull open,” I sneer.

“Even the best ice skaters can do that. There’s always a chance you’ll fall, dumbass.”

I grumble but try to do as he says. Slowly, I get the hang of it. My feet are no longer clattering across the ice, but staying beneath me like they should. However, I cannot skate like Quinton and push myself along, so he has to continue holding my hands that are getting warmer and warmer. I don’t think that warmth has to do with the gloves. Before I know it, I’m gliding across the ice. Quinton lets go of my hands without permission. I take in a shaky breath but throw my arms into the air when at least thirty seconds pass of me remaining on my feet.

“Quinny look!” I demand, somehow moving my feet forward. I’m acting like a kindergartener who won an award, which I basically am. Sue me if I’m a little over excited about icing skate causing no physical damage. He isn’t even holding my hands! Seriously, give me an award!

Quinton appears at my side, one hand behind me in case I fall. I smile at the gesture but say nothing of it. If I did, he'd probably stop and allow me to break my nose on the ice. He'd probably cackle the whole time too, maybe even tease me on the way to the hospital because, let's face it, he's a jerk.

Soon, I'm able to push myself on my own, though nowhere near as skilled as Quinton, who glides with ease. Give me a few days and I'll have this perfected! The fear of falling isn't as bad though. Sometimes I lean a way I shouldn't and my heart races, but I remind myself that falling isn't so bad.

"I guess everyone has to be good at something," Quinton says out of the blue, sliding ahead of me.

I grin. "You admitting that I'm good at ice-skating?"

"I'm saying you could be far worse." He smirks.

"Come here so I can kick your face in."

"You'd try." He easily gets far enough ahead of me not to worry about my threat. I grumble and desperately push my legs to go forward faster, but I can't seem to move a centimeter without him moving an inch. The universe is clearly favoring him! Move, legs, so I can shove my foot in his face!

"Come over here," I demand, although my voice trembles with the desire to laugh.

Quinton shakes his head and moves even farther from me. I swing my arms as if that would somehow help propel me across the ice and to my target. However, I am mistaken and seconds after I flail, I slip and fall straight on my ass with a loud, "Damn it!"

And that's when the miraculous happens.

I hear it, a sound that I have never heard that not only makes my chest tighten with the feeling of victory and my cheeks to burst into flames

because it’s me, I’m the one who brought it out. I’m the one who made Quinton’s lips part into a rare smile and he lets out a deep laugh that is nowhere near as thunderous as my own, and yet, the sound is powerful enough to leave me locked in place.

The smile, though short-lived, is almost childlike. I’m reminded at that moment that Quinton is another teenager, just like me. He smiles. He laughs. He hurts. But, unlike me, he rather shield himself behind layer after layer of defense, but now that defensive boy let those walls down in order to show me, probably the biggest idiot and hindrance of his life, that which he doesn’t show others.

My heart is about ready to jump out of my chest and ride off into the sunset. If death were to take me at this moment, I think I’d be ok with it so long as I saw such a sight once in my lifetime.

“You laughed,” I say.

Quinton finally comes back over to me, kneeling at my side, which pisses me off at how easily he can do such a thing while on skates. I’m about to voice my thoughts when Quinton says, “I laugh. I’m human.”

“Really?” I question teasingly, my lips easily twitching into a smile of their own. How could they not after hearing his laugh, after seeing his smile? “I’ve never heard it before.”

“Well, you’ve heard it now.”

“Will I hear it again?” I ask, wondering if he perhaps caught the sound of hope in my voice, hope that I would be granted the ability to see a side to him that others can’t. I suppose I already have seen many sides that others haven’t, but I greedily want more.

Quinton, as if suddenly smiling, doesn’t sound so strange to him, smiles a second time for the day though this one is not full of laughter. Instead,

there’s a feeling that I can’t quite put my finger on.

“Perhaps,” he replies, standing and holding out his hand for me to take. I do just that. He pulls me up from the cold ground but keeps me close while teasingly saying, “If you do something stupid again.”

Before I get the chance to retort back, the devilish boy leans in to run his lips over mine. Panic surges within me. My eyes dart about the rink only to see that not a single guard is in sight. It’s almost natural the way my arms immediately wrap around his torso in order to feel the heat between us I swear is hot enough to melt the very ice we’re standing on. The same with Quinton. His hand comes up to rest against my cheek, his thumb caressing my chilled face that is becoming warmer with each passing second. We pull apart in order to retrieve much needed air, but our foreheads remain touching.

“There are no guards in here,” I say.

“Great deduction, Sherlock.”

I roll my eyes at his sass. “Were you hoping they wouldn’t want to come into the cold so they’d remain outside?”

Quinton doesn’t even bother to hide his smirk that answers the question for me. My mouth gapes at him. He’s a demon for sure.

“Come now, Aron, I am not so conniving,” he says around a leer that contradicts his words.

“You cheeky shit,” I laugh, but happily come back in for another kiss, seeing as this is going to be as ‘normal’ as our relationship is going to get. Oddly enough, I’m ok with that.

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CHAPTER NINE

Our weekend has long since ended. The weekend was a hell of a lot of fun. We skated until it got dark. The guards came in to remind us we had a curfew. I may or may not have pouted the whole way back but my pout was short-lived after we made it back to Quinton's dorm where we uh…warmed ourselves up. Yeah, let's call it that. It was a great weekend! I hoped that meant whatever was bugging Quinton was done and over with. Clearly, that's not the case.

One would think after our 'talk' of trust and not worrying I would do exactly that, but it seems not even our play or date helped because telling me not to worry is like asking a cat to stop pushing shit off your table. Useless.

I tell myself not to worry, that everything is ok and Quinton will ask for my help if he honestly needs it. I tell myself, don't worry about how Quinton can't seem to look me in the eye. Don't worry that we've spent

hardly any time together. Don’t worry that Raina and Quinton keep leaving campus together. Don’t worry that even Autumn has been texting me asking if Quinton is ok. Don’t worry. Don’t worry.

“Fuck it, I’m worried!” I slam my hands against the table, grabbing the attention of everyone in the cafeteria. Once they realize it’s me who made the noise, they turn their attention away. I don’t know if I should be bothered that they lost interest so easily. Do I do weird things so often that people have become accustomed to it?

Ariel and Langley tear themselves away from each other. Langley watches on in amusement as I grumble about how I am worried under my breath while Ariel takes the initiative and asks, “What are you worried about?”

“Quinton!” They probably already knew that. Actually, I know they knew that seeing as they have been the ones I’ve been speaking most to about it. Autumn as well, but she’s in another school, so it has mostly been through calls and/or texts. “He said not to worry, but he’s being freaking weird. Weirder than normal, at least.”

“Perhaps he’s tired of you already and is thinking of a way to break up—Ouch!”

I smile at Ariel, who hit her boyfriend for saying that. She smiles kindly back and reassures me, “I’m sure that’s not the reason.”

“I don’t see why it couldn’t be,” Langley huffs.

“Ignore him completely, Aron. He’s an idiot.” Ariel kindly said the first sentence but hissed out the last.

I nod vigorously in agreement.

“Anyway,” she sighs, glaring at Langley to show that if he speaks again, she will become cross. He smiles sheepishly and goes back to eating.

“Quinton is the type of guy to not really show what’s actually going on. I know that and I’ve never even really spoken with the guy, so I know you know it.”

“It’s like he’s incapable of comprehending human emotions and instead fakes them. I honestly believe he’s a robot.” I have already proven that’s a lie over the weekend. My mind flashes back to the laughter that shook me to my core and the smile that, even now, makes my heart skip. But what other explanation could there be for his list of many issues? I can never get a damn thing out of him. He keeps avoiding this, insisting that I trust him and not worry, but how am I supposed to not worry?

“How does one not worry about someone who is obviously acting strange?” I ask.

Langley shrugs, giving absolutely nothing to the conversation. Thanks for that, bud. As if he heard my thoughts, he smiles at me and gives a thumbs up. I playfully glare back before returning my attention to Ariel, the only real help. By the way she shakes her head at her boyfriend, she clearly knows that too.

“I imagine he gets annoyed if you try to talk to him about it,” she says.

I nod.

“But that’s really the only way. Snooping would make it seem like you don’t trust him, which is worse. Sorry to say Aron, but the only way to not worry is to find out what’s bothering him and to do that, you need to talk to him. Treat him like a baby deer.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t jump straight to the issues, work up to it slowly with seemingly innocent questions and when you finally feel you have him in your grasp

—” She holds up her open hands then quickly slams them shut. “Trap him by whatever means necessary and force it out of him.”

“Ok,” I mumble, now realizing why these two make such a great couple. “You are both useless and I hate you.”

“It’s Quinton. How else can you solve anything with him without force?” Langley laughs, nodding at his girlfriend’s plan.

Sighing, I slam my head against the table. I need new friends, preferably useful ones. Just as I think this, my phone vibrates, signaling that I have a text. I reach for the device and open it to see that it’s from Autumn. I perk up, happy that I have at least one good friend. It’s obvious we are both worried about Quinton and she, being the one who has known him longest, can probably shed some light on the issue.

I don’t bother going over to Quinton’s tonight. I may or may not be having a fight with him he may or may not be aware of. Ok, so we are having a fight that he isn’t aware of. I’ve been ignoring him since yesterday when I went to hang out with him and Raina during lunch, only to be completely annoyed with her sitting close to him. I should be able to sit that close with him. Ugh!

And he acts weird around her too! She patted his head, and he didn’t get exceedingly violent, which is what I would expect. That’s so not-Quinton-like, and that makes me more worried. He said nothing is going on, but that’s… that’s weird, so I haven’t texted him or ate lunch with him. Now I am not going over either, not that we’d be able to hang out. He and Raina are working on their project, which I hear is due next week. Damn, a three week long project? Shit like that is why I don’t overachieve too much work.

Anyways, what ticks me off more is—I open my phone to see no missed calls or texts. He hasn’t even bothered to message me either. Isn’t he

curious why I haven't hung out with him? Doesn't he want to know why I haven't been bugging him? I scoff and stuff the device back in my pocket. Fine, screw him too, then. I will not see him until he comes to me!

I finish my walk that I had taken simply to cool my head off and head back to my dorm. Once there, I find Ariel and Langley who inquire on why I'm here and not at Quinton's. I reply angrily with, "I don't need to be up his ass all the time!"

"Ah, looks like they're still fighting," Ariel attempts to whisper. I say attempt because obviously I heard it, and really, her whisper is worse than mine!

"Yeah, so give me my 20 bucks," Langley snickers, holding out his hand.

"Stop betting on us!" I shout at the two and throw my homework at them. Both laugh and insist that they could never pass up such easy money. I grumble about lousy friends and move to the bathroom to take a really long shower. I don't want to be around anyone right now.

Another day comes around with no word from Quinton. I have sent him no messages, and he has sent me none either. Langley mentions nothing about how I am constantly checking my phone throughout the day. He pretends not to notice how my eyes rarely leave it for over ten seconds. The damn thing hasn't left my side since this morning. Throughout class, I look away from the teacher to focus on my phone that rests silently beside my hand. At one point, I pick it up with the thought of texting the bastard, but I decide against it.

If he wanted to talk, he'd message me. Obviously, he doesn't mind spending his days with Raina. He would rather hang out with her than speak with his boyfriend. Fine, two can play this game. I can't be the one to always find him. I can't be the one to always start the conversation. If he

honestly gives two shits about me, then he'd pick up his damn phone and message me or come to me in person.

"How long do you think they'll be at this?" Ariel asks during lunch. I roll my eyes at the two attempting to whisper to each other. They are obviously failing. They should know by now that I hear them perfectly fine, yet they still try.

"I can hear you," I grumble over my sandwich.

The two smile sheepishly, looking at each other shyly, then back to me, before Ariel asks, "No word from Quinton?"

I shake my head. "Nope."

"And you haven't messaged him either?"

"Nope."

Langley sighs. "You're like a woman scorned."

I take his strawberry pudding and shove it in my mouth. The boy gasps in horror and looks at me with betrayal in his eyes. "How could you?!" He says, reaching for the soon to be empty pudding cup. "Strawberry is my favorite! You bastard."

I shrug, smacking my lips together when I finish the last spoonful, showing him how much I enjoyed the snack before saying, "Don't be a jerk."

Langley grumbles childishly.

"What the hell else am I supposed to do? It's not right for me to always go running to him. He needs to take the initiative every now and again, right?" I look between the two of them for an answer. Langley grumbles an agreement as Ariel nods vigorously. "Something is obviously up and we all know he will not tell me about it willingly. I don't know what else to do."

I have lost my appetite. In fact, I haven't had it for a while, all week actually. Eating requires energy, energy that I have been putting into my thoughts so I am left lifeless most of the time.

I sigh and push my tray towards Langley, asking if he wished to finish it. The boy looks at me with concern. I always finish my lunch, sometimes even complain that it's never enough and get more. Langley nods and takes the food from me, becoming my personal trash can. I rest my head against the cafeteria table and remain silent throughout the rest of lunch.

I don't wish to snoop around in order to discover the truth because it'd make it seem like I don't trust him. I also don't want to be left in the dark. How am I to help if I don't know what it is I am meant to help with? Why does Quinton have to take everything on alone? He needs to get it in his head that we're in this together! As boyfriends, we are meant to help one another. If something is wrong, I am here to help. Why doesn't he get that?

The day goes by agonizingly slow. By the end of the day, I'm about to cave and storm over to Quinton's to beat the answer out of him. However, I resist the urge and return to my dorm, where I, as Langley put it, mope about the room playing video games.

My phone buzzing wildly in my pocket pulls me from my game. I reach for it with lightning speed, not even bothering to look at the caller idea before answering, "Hello?"

"Aron." It's Autumn and her voice sends a shiver down my spine. I feel guilty for being disappointed that it's her. "We need to talk. Can you meet me at the gates of your school in about thirty minutes?"

"I, uh...yeah, definitely. I'll be there," I reply.

She hangs up immediately, giving no chance to question why. Now my heart is racing a mile a minute. What could she possibly have to tell me in

person? Autumn's never made her way over to campus to speak to me. We always speak over the phone, yet she has something so important that she needs to see me immediately.

Thirty minutes after Autumn's call, I stand at the school gates with my hands shoved in my coat pockets. Though spring is here, the weather is unstable, unable to decide whether it wishes to be hot as hell or freezing balls out. Right now it's cold enough for me to wear a heavy jacket along with a hat. Guards stand at the gates, keeping a very close eye on me. I see a familiar head of black curls heading this way, covered in as many layers as I am. I wave to show Autumn I have seen her. The action causes her to pick up her pace. Once in range, she throws her arms around me in a tight embrace that makes me laugh.

"You know this is only the second time we've ever seen each other in person, but I feel like we see each other every day," I say, happily hugging her.

"Same." She giggles, pulling away to reveal hazel eyes full of worry. "I wished it was for a different reason."

"I'm thinking the same." I sigh, a puff of white smoke escaping my lips. "What was so important that you had to see me in person?"

"First off, I knew if we brought up any embarrassing topics you'd hang up on me," Autumn says around narrowed eyes that make me whistle innocently. "And second, I didn't think about it until earlier, but this girl that Quinton is working with in chemistry, is this her?" Autumn holds up her phone to reveal Raina. It's a school picture taken in a uniform that does not belong to Thorton's.

"Yeah, where did you get that from?"

“She used to go to my school,” Autumn mumbles, as she concentrates on deleting the picture from her phone. “She was super smart and got in on a scholarship to Thorton, like Quinton.”

Ah, knew she had to be a brainiac to get into Advanced Chemistry with the almighty Quinton.

“What’s that got to do with it?” I ask.

“Well, there was this huge thing that happened when she got into Thorton,” she says, waving her hands animatedly, making me hold back a chuckle. Again, how did she befriend Quinton? She’s so lively. “Suddenly a bunch of people were talking about how she cheated to get in. Somehow found the answers to the examination for Thorton. She was supposed to start there a year early, but because of the accusations, they had to do an investigation. Eventually, she was let in, though. From the sounds of it, Thornton’s didn’t want her ,but they couldn’t exactly say no when the school had no physical proof.”

“Are you thinking she’s trying to take Quinny’s notes or something? I don’t get how that would explain his weird behavior,” I utter my lost thoughts that make Autumn pull an anime. I swear I see a sweat drop forming on her head.

“What I’m getting at is, Quinton has the highest grades in the school, right?” She inquires.

“Obviously. As if he’d allow himself to be second.” Freaking overachiever.

“And Raina had to cheat to get in, possibly. What if she’s got something on him and is trying to get his help for finals?” Autumn suggests an idea that makes my body shake because..."If the school finds out he let someone cheat off him or was even involved with her..."

“He’d lose his scholarship,” I speak breathlessly, eyes widening. My hands go limp. I am finding myself bombarded with memories of how I once wished for such a thing. I desired the boy to be expelled. Now, the idea of him leaving makes my stomach churn. “No way, he wouldn’t risk that. What the hell could she have on him?”

Because he’s the great Quinton who has never done wrong. His grades are immaculate not because he looks off others, but because he is immaculate. The only stains in his life are me and the fights we went through our sophomore year.

“Do you have any idea why he’s putting up with her? There has to be a reason,” Autumn says, pulling me from the many scenarios I’m conjuring on how to get rid of Raina without having to face a lawsuit.

I shake my head, ready to answer in the negative when it hits me like a ton of bricks. It’s so obvious that I can’t keep myself from slamming my hands against my face. Groaning, I run my hands down my face, ignoring the look Autumn makes that shows she’s questioning my sanity. That’s fine, everyone does it, I’ve gotten used to it.

“I think she saw us,” I say, recalling the library when I first met Raina. That has to be it. As I said, the only stain in Quinton’s life...is me.

“Saw you?” Autumn hums, wishing for me to elaborate.

“Quinton and I… we kissed in the library.” I bite my lip. The feelings of guilt wash over me with a force that actually makes my knees physically weak. It’s my fault.

“Like a peck on the cheek or a full on make-out session?”

“This is serious!” I shout. She giggles.

“Just trying to defuse the tension,” she says, giggling.

I flick her forehead, ordering her to get her mind out of the gutter before continuing, “Anyway, Raina popped up that day. I didn’t think she saw us, but maybe she did?”

I don’t want to believe it. If that’s the case, then the only reason Quinton is in this mess is because of me. Quinton wouldn’t possibly let someone have the upper hand over him because of me. If she saw us, if she has proof of our relationship and is using it to play Quinton, then it’s my fault. I’m the prince. If word got out that I was with a guy, all hell would break loose. The papers would have a field day. Paparazzi would be at my parent’s throats. Quinton knows this. If he were dating someone else, there would be no problem. He could have told her to fuck off, to reveal the truth, but because it’s me, he has to hide the truth and do as she says. It’s my fault. Guilt eats away at my insides. I feel sick at the thought of Quinton actually having to bow down to someone because of me. I’m his only mistake.

“I don’t want to say it, but that could be the problem,” Autumn responds around a sad smile. She takes my hands in her own in order to squeeze them reassuringly. “He wouldn’t want to cause you any trouble.”

“He’s causing me trouble by not asking for my help, the asshole,” I meant to say that with annoyance but it comes out rather pathetic. If only I wasn’t the prince. We wouldn’t have this problem. Raina would have no way to blackmail him. It’s because, no matter how hard I try, things will always be this way. Someone will always have something to say, a complaint to give, a problem to arise because of my title. We will never be normal. We will never be able to speak the truth.

“You need to talk to him about this. If that’s really what’s going on, then I’m sure the two of you can find a way to fix it,” Autumn says, squeezing my hands. She leans up to press a chaste kiss to my cheek. I mumble an

agreement. We speak for a few more minutes about trivial things before the last bus arrives, returning to town. With a sad smile, she says goodbye and reassures me that Quinton and I will work things out.

As I wave to her, I can’t help but think it doesn’t matter. One way or another, Quinton and I will one day be torn apart.

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CHAPTER TEN

I stare down at an article the next day with a headline reading Prince Seen With Girl From Rolland Academy! A picture of Autumn and I outside the school gates with our hands together is beneath the headline. A small paragraph follows claiming that a passerby saw this mystery girl and I speaking closely with one another that night. Passerby, sure, is that what we're calling the paparazzi nowadays? As if my week has not been bad enough. Now rumors are flying throughout the school of Autumn and I dating. Everyone is speaking of how I 'stole' Quinton's girl. Fantastic!

"Isn't that Quinton's girl from the Valentine's day dance?"

"Don't you think he's taking it too far?"

"Stealing someone's girlfriend just to get back at him is too cruel."

"She must be a gold digger!"

That's all I hear throughout the day. Langley tries to comfort me, saying things like, it'll pass and it's no big deal, but it is a big deal because it's me.

Everything I do is a big deal. I'm surprised they don't write articles about my taking a shit daily. I can't do a thing without someone twisting it into whatever their minds wish it to be. Honestly, who has the time to follow me so much to actually get a picture like this? And how desperate are they to get the article out overnight! I hate to say it, but whoever did it deserves a raise. Seriously, this is both annoying and well done. End me now.

I groan and slam my head against my desk. My parents contacted me this morning the moment they read the article. I had to reassure them both that Autumn is nothing more than a friend. Though Mom didn't sound so convinced, they eventually let me be and told me they'd do their best to take care of it.

Autumn eventually messages me during class.

Autumn: Did you see my ass in that picture? It looks fantastic. Yours, not so much.

I apologize to the poor girl who has been pulled into a stupid story. She isn't bothered by it, instead insisting that we go to a pop concert because Quinton hates those and it'd be fun. Speaking of Quinton, he must have seen the article. I doubt he believes a word of it, but he could at least try to talk to me about it. I have no new messages or missed calls from him.

Could it be that he hasn't seen the article yet? The entire school is talking about it, though. I'm sure someone has asked him about the drama. I grumble to myself about 'cold and heartless boyfriends.' Can't he pretend to be a little jealous? Freaking jerk.

As much as I wish to continue ignoring the bastard, I have things to discuss with him. The thought of him being around Raina, who could destroy his entire future, sickens me. Should I get the proof I need, that girl

will find herself thrown out of Thorton's in a second. If I need to use my name to get that leech away from Quinton, so be it.

When lunch rolls around, I inform Langley and Ariel that I will go to kidnap Quinton, seeing as I doubt the boy wishes to willingly speak about what's going on. Langley wishes me luck while Ariel says something along the lines of kidnapping being illegal. It's only illegal if I'm caught. Anyway, I make my way to the library, where I expect Quinton and Raina to be. Neither of them are expecting me since I haven't come around or spoke to Quinton in days. Perhaps my absence was a good thing. I remain silent behind the bookshelves as I creepily listen in on their conversation that sparks my interest.

"Aron hasn't been around lately. Did you two break up already?" Raina asks. Quinton doesn't reply. "Why don't you two break up already?"

My assumption that she knows of us is proven correct. I'm ready to turn the corner and give her a piece of my mind when Quinton's voice stops me.

"No, that won't happen." He sounds so sure of it, like there isn't a single part of him that doesn't believe we'll make it through this bump. My cheeks warm. I mentally kick myself for thinking this man to be a heartless bastard. Ok, so I am sure I will always say he is one, but he obviously isn't. Damn it, stop being such a good guy! Let me be angry with you. Ugh, you bastard and by you bastard, I mean you're totally not a bastard. He's making it difficult to be mad at him.

"You sound so sure even after that article about him and Autumn. Isn't she your ex-girlfriend?"

Quinton remains silent.

Sighing, Raina adds, "Whatever, just don't forget what will happen if you don't do as I ask. You have to help me because we wouldn't want Aron's

dirty laundry aired out.”

She really is blackmailing him…

Taking a deep breath, I remind myself that it is not ok to resort to violence, and turn the corner to find the two of them with their attention now on me. Quinton doesn’t look shocked, but Raina does. Her eyes widen when I ask, “What about my dirty laundry?”

I put on a sickly sweet smile as I make my way over to them. Seeing as she’s already aware of our relationship, I don’t stop myself from walking up behind Quinton and wrapping my arms around his neck. The boy stiffens, peeking up at me with feigned disgust.

“Sorry that I’ve been gone for so long. Sometimes I can’t stand seeing this asshole’s face.” I pat said face a little rougher than I need to. Quinton says nothing and makes no sign of moving.

“Ah, yeah, I bet he gets on your nerves sometimes,” Raina says offhandedly.

“You guys are turning in your project this week, right?” I ask, recalling that they said it’d be due this week. Both nod. “Good! You’re probably basically done with it?”

“Yes, we’re about done with it,” Raina replies, looking from me to Quinton. If she expects him to speak, she’s disappointed because he says nothing. He doesn’t look at her either.

“Great, because Quinny and I have things we need to discuss. You two can finish later. Come on Quinton.” I remove myself from Quinton’s neck to grab his bicep. I tug at his arm until he caves and allows me to escort him out of the library. I don’t remove my hand from his arm even when we enter the hall.

“Aron,” he calls halfway down the hall. “Let go. People are staring.”

“I don’t care,” is my grumbled reply.

Quinton, not liking my retort, forcefully rips his arm from my grasp, causing the both of us to stop. I look at the boy, whose face remains placid, while mine must be showing how pissed I am. It has to be. I feel hot. I imagine I’m red from my toes to the tip of my head.

“Your next class is about to start,” Quinton says, gesturing with his head down the hall.

“I’m not going to my next class, and neither are you.”

“I have lunch next,” the smart ass states. When I simply stare back at him rather than comment on his annoying ways, the boy sighs and asks, “Why am I not going?”

“Because we’re heading back to my dorm to discuss that blackmailing piece of shit.”

For once, Quinton doesn’t argue or deter me from my plans. That may be because we are in the center of campus. We both know that I have no problem with running my mouth, regardless of the location. Considering that all eyes are now on us, it is in both our best interests to leave. The two of us travel to my dorm. If I weren’t so focused on Raina, I would probably freak out over how easily Quinton agreed to not only follow me but also skip class. I’d be so happy that he skipped class for me, but I’m too busy being pissed off. I’ll be happy about it later.

We reach my dorm and Quinton doesn’t hesitate to drop his things on my desk before taking a seat in the chair. I stand because, for some reason, the idea of sitting bothers me. My legs shake, but not in the ‘I’m going to fall’ kind of way. It’s more like my nerves are going haywire and so I’m trying to pace in order to calm myself.

“Autumn visited me,” I say. Quinton twirls a pen between his fingers. How does he even do that? Wait, that’s not important.

“I know. I saw the article.”

“And you’re ok with the article?”

Quinton shrugs. “Why wouldn’t I be? It’s not like you two did anything.”

“I’m not some idiot who will feel better knowing that my boyfriend trusts me, so don’t go thinking because you said that that it will change what we’re about to talk about!”

“It won’t?” He hums. “I guess I underestimated you.”

I groan and run my hands through my hair. I have to inhale deeply through my nostrils in order to help my labored breathing. “Why didn’t you tell me about Raina? Autumn must have told you about her.”

“Because I can handle it.” He says that yet here we are, three weeks later, and he has handled nothing. Things are getting worse. We hardly hang out. Hell, I ignored him for a couple days, more like a week, but whatever! Not that he didn’t ignore me back.

“It’s not about whether or not you can handle it. We’re in this together, aren’t we?” I shout, now standing at his side. I slam my hand against the desk and place the other on the back of the computer chair. I use the hold to turn the chair enough to have Quinton facing me. “Rely on me some, won’t you?”

Quinton keeps his eyes off me. He refuses to pull his gaze off the cup of pens on my desk. They are not interesting at all, yet he seems incapable of looking away.

“That’s not the problem,” he whispers.

“Then what is?” Because I honestly can’t think of anything other than him not trusting or believing in me that could lead to him keeping this a secret.

Quinton tears his eyes from the pens to focus on me. A shiver runs down my spine from the gaze that holds me in place. “I knew you’d think about how if you weren’t the prince, we wouldn’t have had such a problem.”

I can’t even respond because that is exactly what I have been thinking. How is it Quinton knows me so well? I haven’t voiced my concerns to him, and yet, he knows. He knows exactly what plagues me.

“That...” That what? Isn’t the point? But it is, it is the point. It’s always been the point.

“I knew it’d bother you, like I’m assuming it is right now,” he says, sounding so sure of himself, but when doesn’t he?

It is. I bite my lip. What I have been saying since the beginning hits me hard. I am the prince and everything I do is monitored. Should people discover my relationship with a guy, it will be on every TV show, in every paper, and all over the world within an hour. It doesn’t matter if people accept us or not. There are expectations for me. I need an heir, to continue the family line, especially me since I am an only child. Surrogacy could be very tricky should we pick the wrong person. I will be the weakness within my family. I will be what destroys us. It will be my fault.

“So if I wasn’t the prince, would you have let her tell everyone about us?” I ask, unsure if I wish to hear the answer.

Quinton, most likely sensing this, remains silent, which answers my questions anyway. I sigh and move away from him, continuing my pacing rather than taking a seat.

As I pace, my thoughts run a mile a minute. Questions like, is this relationship even worth our time and perhaps we got too lost in the moment and made a mistake, because, honestly, there’s no way we’ll work out.

I stop in my tracks, staring into the wall as if it holds the answers to my life. These thoughts have crossed my mind before. I have been haunted by reality, but now that I've faced what is to come, it has made me understand it fully.

This won't be the only time we're in a situation like this. In the future, if others were to discover the truth, we will be left in the same position, but it would most likely be far worse. Raina is nothing more than a young girl with eyes on her future, how she wishes to succeed and graduate from an elite school in order to get into an even better college, but we definitely could and, most likely will, come across someone worse. Not to mention, at some point, people will question why I haven't married or made a mention of it. One way or the other, this relationship will come to an end, even if we don't want it to. That's the reality of it.

I drop to my bed, leaning forward to shield the pathetic expression I expect is on my face. My arms hang between my legs. I twiddle with my fingers, looking for the best way to ask this. I can't come up with one, so I go with whatever comes out first.

"Do you think we're being naïve?" I ask.

Quinton doesn't respond, but hearing the chair squeak, as if he moved to look at me, tells me to elaborate.

"Do you think we got caught up in the moment? It's not like anything will come of this relationship. At some point, we'll have to end it."

To think, at one point, I would have given anything to kick Quinton out of my life. Now, I'd give anything to keep him in it. Sadly, I do not get everything I want. Now that I think about it, I don't think I ever have nor ever will. As the prince, I am expected to be mature, smart, kind, and generous. It doesn't matter what I want, that is what I am to be and if I'm

not, I am a disgrace. I am to go to a top-notch college, make excellent grades, find myself a beautiful, royal woman who I am to marry, have children, and rule with, even if that's not what I want.

I'm too busy wallowing in my self-pity to notice Quinton's movements until he's already in front of me. I see his legs within my view. I remove my gaze from the floor to peer up into black eyes that leave me breathless. Anger, confusion, and disappointment can clearly be seen on his face, which is enough to tell me I have tripped something in his mind. Quinton, the normally placid, stone faced, heartless bastard, is looking at me as if I had said the absolute worst thing to ever pass his ears.

"Do you really think that?" He asks, his voice hardly above a whisper, yet it's stronger than any shout or scream. "If so, then as you said, we should end it now. I won't put up with your half-assed feelings, Aron."

"Half-assed?" I hiss, getting offended that he would call what is swirling within me as half-assed. My feelings are anything but, and I'm about to voice that to the boy, but his sharp words put me back in my place.

"There is no such thing as happily ever after," he states. "There will always be something or someone in your way, but letting fear stop you from doing what you feel is right… it's pathetic."

I don't know what to say. I am scared. I'm scared that, one day, we'll be found out. One day, whether it's tomorrow or ten years from now, Quinton and I will find ourselves before the eyes of the world. I'm scared of what we'll face and if we'll even be able to face it.

"My feelings aren't half-assed," I eventually mumble because I don't know what else to say. I don't wish to voice my fears. Besides, I am sure Mr. Know-It-All is already aware of said fears.

“Aren’t they? You’re giving up because you’re a little scared. That’s not like you, Princess.”

The old jab makes me growl and glare at the boy, who knows exactly what he’s doing. He smirks that annoying, smug smirk of his that makes my hands clench into fists. I stand to face him and declare, “I’m not giving up.”

“Sure sounds like you are.”

He knows how to rile me up. He knows how to dwindle my fears, how to play me like he was born for that sole purpose. At this moment, I’m kind of glad for that, glad that I have someone so willing to push me to do better, to go farther, to never give in, and to think it’s this cold-hearted bastard.

“I’m not! I just...I was just thinking about things. You know I suck at that, which I wouldn’t have had to think of if you hadn’t talked to me about Raina rather than leave me on my own!”

“Oh?” Quinton cocks a brow and crosses his arms over his chest. “So you’re blaming me? I see how this relationship is gonna go.”

I shove the leering demon from me before I get the urge to actually punch him. “As if, and just admit that you messed up in not telling me. We could have worked on it together rather than have a fight.”

“We were fighting? I thought you were giving me a break.”

Seriously. I will kill him and I voice this thought only to have him give me a no you won’t look. Yes, that’s a specific look.

I sigh and take a seat back on my bed to ask, “So, what are we going to do about Raina? Did she see us?”

“She has a picture of us kissing,” Quinton replies, telling me I was right and yet again reminding me it’s my fault that the normally standing tall Quinton has to bow down to anyone.

He takes a seat beside me on the bed, closer than necessary, but I say nothing. Our shoulders brush and maybe I inch my hand towards his and maybe he opens his hand, allowing me to slip my fingers between his. Neither of us mentions the hold between us since, if we did, we'd probably pull apart.

"Ah, that's no good." It must have been from the time in the library. We don't know how many copies she has or if she has sent it to anyone else. This could be tricky. "Have you seen it?"

Quinton looks at me as if to say that what I inquired was a dumb question. I shrug and ignore the look as he sarcastically replies, "No, Aron, I haven't."

"Shut your mouth before I punch you."

Quinton rolls his eyes but says nothing about my threat that we both know is a lie. We haven't had a physical fight in months and I sure as hell don't plan on having another.

"Part of the deal was that she kept that one copy, though I doubt we could trust that to be true," Quinton says, seeming to go over whatever information she gave him in his head.

"We could always kill her and dispose of her body," I suggest, already coming up with plans. Ok, so I've had the plans for a while, but let's pretend I'm only thinking them up now.

"That's murder, and it's illegal, even for you, Princess."

"Just a thought," I mumble, imagining pulling off said murder. This girl pisses me off. I'm going to kick her off a cliff... or something. As long as she's nowhere near my boyfriend.

Whoa, wait a second, getting violent there, Aron. Before you couldn't even think of Quinton as a boyfriend and now you're getting all defensive?

Calm yourself.

This is complicated. Nowadays, everything is linked. If she has the photo on her phone, then it's likely connected to her computer as well. Even if I get my hands on her phone, there's no guarantee it isn't already saved on her computer. Damn, technology is excellent black mailing material.

"So, what does she want from you?" I ask.

"Her grades are plummeting," he responds, meaning that Autumn and I were right. By the sounds of it, Miss Raina most likely cheated her way into Thorton's. Now that her grades are dropping and nearly beyond repair, she's going to rely on the smartest guy in school.

Quinton sounds exhausted. "We sit by each other in most of our classes. She plans on cheating off me during finals week."

"You could get expelled for that," I mutter, even if I know he is aware of that. He even nods, showing that yes, he knows. She could get expelled too, but seeing as she's on the verge of getting kicked out anyway for her grades, it seems she feels she hasn't anything to lose.

"We'll think of something," Quinton says, his eyes sending his famous death glare at my floor. He's pretty pissed at the idea of being outsmarted by someone.

I nod, choosing to say nothing since I don't have a clue how to get us out of this mess. However, one way or the other, I know we'll think of something together.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

We better think of something quick because this annoying blackmailer is making me think that murder isn't such a bad idea. I swear to god if she—

I slam my hands against the table suddenly when Raina dares to rest her hand on Quinton's shoulder. Quinton looks at me, communicating with his eyes that I'm going to make it obvious that I know. I ignore the look, choosing to narrow my eyes on Raina, who probably is clueless to what she has done. It isn't like she's running her hand on his chest, but she's blackmailing him, so I don't want her anywhere near him for any reason!

"Is something wrong, Aron?" she asks.

"No, nothing," I lie, thinking over how wonderful it'd be to toss her ass into a dungeon. "Just felt like messing up Quinton's concentration."

He rolls his eyes and returns to his work. The two have turned in their chemistry project, but she's still around. I knew she would be. Doesn't

mean her presence can’t bug the hell out of me. Give us back our alone time!

“I’m surprised you’re with us,” Raina says, continuing her act of playing nice. “I’d figured you’d be off talking to your girlfriend.”

“Excuse me?” I ask. “I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just saw an article about it the other day.”

“Paparazzi don’t care about the truth,” I scoff, crossing my arms as I recall times that the papers have written trash about my father or me. “They write whatever will get people’s attention and, obviously, that got their attention.”

“That’s a shame, though. You’re such a nice guy. I don’t know how you haven’t gotten yourself a girlfriend yet. Is there anyone you like?” She asks around a grin that I now know to be pure evil.

She is more evil than Quinton, and that is a freaking miracle. Quinton may be a hell spawn, but she is the Queen of Hell. She is the one who spawns the demons. You know who I like! I am going to beat her face in with a fucking book. Can’t she go cheat off some other guy? What’s so great about Quinton, anyway? He’s an ass. She has to be fed up with being around him. Passing is not worth putting up with him! I say that yet I’m dating him… I don’t even have a comment.

“There is someone I like, actually,” I respond. The reply makes Quinton tear his gaze from his book. He seems very interested in what I have to say. He’s probably thinking that I’ll blow our cover. “However, as a prince, it’s difficult being with them. I can’t imagine what my dad would do if he found out.”

Raina smiles to herself and looks ready to speak, probably to say something smart because she thinks she has the upper hand, but that smile

falls when I continue speaking, “Should my dad find out whoever revealed who I liked, I imagine he’d be pretty pissed.”

Her smile dwindles with each word.

“He’d be more pissed at who thought it’d be a good idea to hurt his only child. He’d hate to see me suffering. He is known for spoiling me. I bet he’d do anything to make that person’s life a living hell.” I keep my eyes narrowed on the girl who seems to understand what I’m getting at based on her shaking.

“He’s the king, after all. He can do as he wishes,” I tack on. My sadistic side enjoys the way her eyes spark with fear.

I hadn’t planned to use my father’s power but, in this situation, it’s all I can think of. The thought that Raina has Quinton wrapped around her finger infuriates me. I don’t care if it makes me look pathetic or weak, because it’s more important to get her away from us as soon as possible. Quinton’s entire future is at stake. I will not allow such a person to ruin what he has worked hard to achieve. If I have to use my position, then so be it.

“Yes, I imagine he would be,” she breathes, her eyes finally looking away from my own to Quinton, who still has his eyes on me. “You’re his only child, after all.”

“I am.” I nod, now leaning in to rest my elbows on the table and my chin on my intertwined hands. “I mean, how would you feel if someone purposelessly tried to wreck your life simply because of who you are? My father hates people like that the most.”

Raina has no comment. She remains quiet until the bell rings, signaling the end of my lunch and their study hall. Raina stands quickly, grabbing her things in a rush in order to exit the library without Quinton. I glance at the boy to see him with his eyes glued on me.

“What?” I ask, feeling awkward with his attentive gaze.

“Nothing,” he mutters, but I’m not as naïve as I once was. I have been around Quinton enough to know when something is up. His actions are no longer a complete mystery to me, though I’m sure there will always be times when I can’t read him, but now I clearly see he’s hiding something.

“It’s not nothing,” I hiss, following him out of the library. People whisper around us, probably about the article, seeing as it’s still the talk of the school. I think everyone is expecting us to get into a fight. Sorry to disappoint, but that’s not happening!

I grab his shoulder, forcing him to turn and face me. “Are you mad about what I said? I had to. We can’t do anything with her having that picture. Obviously our only choice was to use my title—”

“That’s not it.” Quinton rubs his temple. He brushes my hand off his shoulder to continue his path to the cafeteria. “Get to class. We wouldn’t want you to go any further into the depths of dumb.”

“I’m not dumb!” I holler after the boy, who completely ignores me.

Damn him, I’m not! What’s he acting all weird for, anyway? I didn’t outright say that I know what Raina is up to, though she probably got the picture. What did I do?

I think over what I said earlier, trying to pinpoint when Quinton began acting strange. Well, he was focused on his work until Raina asked if there was someone I liked. Obviously, she knew the answer to that! And I said there is someone. Then Quinton started staring at me like I was the most interesting thing on—

Huh? Really? Was that it? Is he mad because I admitted to liking someone? But I like him and he knows that! Does he think I don’t? He’s the

one who stated that I did! Don’t act all shy about it, it’s going to make me feel awkward.

I make my way to class, finding Langley waiting for me. He notices the slightly annoyed look on my face and asks about it. I shrug his questioning off, assuring the boy that it’s nothing and I’ll be fine. Of course, he gives me a look that states he doesn’t believe me but drops it, choosing to, as he put it, let me come clean later.

Whatever, I don’t need to come clean. He’ll probably charge me for talking about Quinton anyway, freaking jerk. The rest of the day I’m left with my thoughts, going over why Quinton would be so bothered about my admission. Then it hits me like a truck.

I’ve never said I liked him.

Quinton has assumed. Sure, we’ve gotten each other off, but neither of us has actually said that we like each other. Do I have to tell him I like him? He knows, so why should I have to say it? If I did, would that make him happy? Would it bother him? There is no way Quinton is, possibly, feeling insecure about the feelings I have towards him. I can’t handle it if he is. We can’t both be insecure. It’s his job to be the cocky one who knows everything while I panic. That’s how this relationship works!

“Hey, Langley,” I whisper, making him grin ear to ear. That little shit knew I was going to talk to him about my troubles, eventually. He doesn’t have to look so happy about being right. Makes me want to slap that grin off his stupid face.

“Yes, Your Highness?” He leans towards me in order to hear me better. We have to whisper since class is still in session.

“Do you tell Ariel you like her?”

Langley gives me a quizzical look. “Yeah. Why?”

“Should I, like, tell Quinton or is it different for us?” I suppose that’s a dumb question. It’s not like our relationship differs from any other. If you like someone, you tell them you like them, but Quinton is so Quinton-like. He isn’t much for things like cuddling, holding hands, or dates. In fact, I am still shocked we’re dating and even more shocked that he dated someone before me.

Langley bites his lip to hold back his grin. I glare at the boy that’s starting to laugh. His shoulders shake from holding back the laughter. He replies, between soft chuckles that wish to be louder, “If you like him, then why not?”

“Why does it sound like you’re trying to tease me with that supposedly serious answer?”

Langley shakes his head and simply says to tell Quinton if I feel I need to. He makes it sound so easy, like telling the most emotionless being in the galaxy that you like them isn’t a crazy idea.

Somehow, I work up the courage to message Quinton, insisting that he meet up with me immediately at my dorm. I don’t want any interruptions. Langley has already informed me he’ll be hanging out with Ariel after class, which means my dorm is safest. Quinton texts back, asking why it has to be now instead of once classes are finished. I simply threaten him that if he doesn’t, I will request Autumn send me all embarrassing childhood photos —honestly, I’m probably going to do, anyway.

My heart races when he agrees. I take deep breaths to help steady my nerves. Not that it helps at all, but, hey, it’s worth giving a shot, right? I make it to my dorm without even realizing it. I’m currently thinking not so decent thoughts when my door opens to reveal Quinton waltzing in as if he owns the place.

“What the hell? Ever heard of knocking, jackass?” I hiss.

Quinton’s eyes say exactly what he’s thinking; you walk into my room unannounced constantly. And that may be a hundred percent accurate, but that is not the point. He is meant to be the mature one, so knock, damn it!

Quinton tosses his belongings next to my bed then hops onto said bed to make himself comfortable behind me. I glare back at the boy, who is far too at ease in my bed. He doesn’t seem to find it as much of a problem as me, seeing as he’s now tearing up my blanket in order to wrap himself in it. I guess it is pretty cool out, so he may be cold. Still, he could at least fake being a little uncomfortable, for my sake!

“What do you want?” He questions, voice muffled by the comforter. Once he finds himself happily snuggled in it, he sits up. I can’t help but chuckle at how childish he looks with the blanket around him. His eyes narrow at me for laughing, but it’s his own fault for doing it!

“I can’t hang out with my boyfriend without a reason?” Wow, I’ve been admitting we’re boyfriends aloud more often. I guess I have gone insane.

Quinton doesn’t retort to that.

“Anyway,” I huff, swinging my legs onto my bed so that they rest at his side. I lean back, my hands resting on the bed to keep me up so that we’re now opposite each other. “What got your panties in a knot earlier?”

“Excuse you?” He grimaces at my wording.

I chuckle and rephrase the question, “Why were you all pissy earlier?”

He doesn’t seem to like that question either. “I wasn’t pissy,” he argues. “If this was your reason for making me skip the rest of class, I’m leaving.”

Now it’s my turn to roll my eyes. “Yes, you were pissy! Right after I said that I liked someone.”

I watch for a reaction and, surprisingly; I get one. For a split second, his eyes seem to widen. Literally it was only a second. I know I saw it, though. Rather than allowing him to argue with me, I speak first. My words get more and more quiet as I speak, like I'm trying to avoid saying it, which I am. "But I don't see why it would make you pissy. You already know who that person is."

Knowing I like Quinton and saying I do are on opposite sides of the spectrum. Admitting it aloud is basically placing a seal on it, confirming it, making it real to the both of us. Quinton and I have always assumed our feelings. To be honest, that doesn't surprise me. It's the way we are, but perhaps, it's ok to admit the truth every now and again.

Quinton allows the blanket to drop from his shoulders so his arm can reach out to grab me. I let out a surprised yelp when he takes hold of my jacket, using the hold to pull me across the bed so that we're nose to nose. My flush is instantaneous. That doesn't stop me from attempting an annoyed glare. I say attempted because I imagine it isn't so intimidating with my face lighting up like a Christmas tree.

"Do I now?" He pushes, knowing exactly where he's leading me, not that I'm unaware. This is what I have been wondering, should I say it? Would it make him happy? By the way, he's waiting, with his eyes glued to me almost hopefully, I'd say I have my answer.

"It should be obvious," I whisper against lips that are now hovering above mine, waiting to hear words that mean a lot between us. My breath hitches in my throat out of fear, excitement, and nervousness. I push aside any ridiculous thoughts that may hinder me. So, with bated breath, I push out what I have been denying for a long time and have only more recently come to terms with. "I like you a lot...you freaking asshole."

Ah, there it is again. A smile that leaves me speechless, though with what he has to say next I would have been speechless anyway, “Yeah, me too, Princess.”

And before I can have a mental breakdown from hearing his off handed admission, his lips crash into mine with a hunger that has my hands clutching desperately at the blankets to remind me that this is reality. Though my consciousness is mush from the physical interactions between our tongues, it is still repeating his words over and over like a mantra to keep me going.

He likes me too and though I knew that; it felt a thousand times better hearing it, even if he didn’t outright say it. Don’t worry; I’ll get him to say it one day, for now I’ll cut him some slack.

I am relieved to find that Quinton is a raging, hormonal teenager such as myself. If he were to be as much a stick in the mud as I had suspected, I imagine we’d have a problem.

Our kissing doesn’t stop, rather it escalates until I find Quinton’s roaming lips against my throat. Consciously or not, I elongate my neck to allow him access to wherever he pleases so long as he continues the pleasurable ministrations.

I’m pushed back onto the bed with much ease. My body is wide awake and demanding much needed attention, specifically from Quinton. I groan when he runs his tongue over an area that, I’ll yell at him for doing it later, is going to leave a mark. I’m too busy focusing on removing his jacket to care about the soon to be hickey.

I’m relieved that his thoughts are as focused on relieving me of my clothes as well. If I’m the only one to be a pent up horny mess, I don’t know what I’d do. Drown myself in the tub? Smother myself with a pillow?

Sink into the depths of despair before offering my soul to Satan? Probably all the above.

Thankfully, that's not the case and I find the both of us to be a tangled mess of limbs in no time. When my pants and boxers were removed, I do not know I'm too busy focusing on enjoying the expanse of Quinton's body. I don't care where I'm touching or why, so long as I can feel his warm skin beneath my fingertips that reveals to me how much he is also loving our play. Quinton may control his emotions, control the looks he gives, but he certainly cannot control his body and the way it shivers, jerks, or leans into certain brushes of my fingertips or lips, seeing as I am exploring as much of him with those as I am my hands. What can I say? Quinton's pretty addictive with his clothes off.

I take hold of him and he's quick to return the favor. My room becomes unbearably hot, to where I question whether it's possible for two people to heat up so much without exploding. The heat isn't enough to make me want to push Quinton away. It feels too good to touch like this.

Our lips can't get enough of each other. After tearing ourselves apart to breathe, we simply dive back in for another and another until I think his taste is permanently engraved into me. By how easily our bodies conform to each other, by the way our bodies shake and desperately grind against each other, I think it's safe to say we're both a hot mess with only one thing on our mind—or maybe Quinton has something a little different because I feel his hand run down the back of my thigh.

Quinton rests his forehead against mine. His eyes remain locked on mine, as if to request for something that we haven't gotten to yet. It's not as if I didn't imagine this day would come. Let's face it, I've thought of a situation similar to this multiple times. I've awakened in the night, sweaty and

aroused after a dream circling around what is happening right now. Though the idea of going that final step with Quinton is unbelievably tempting...

“I am not bottoming first.” A man has his pride.

Quinton shakes his head. “You’re an idiot.”

Me being, well, me, removes one of my arms from his waist to hold up a fist. Quinton gives me a quizzical look that turns to one of utter disbelief when I say, “Best two out of three.”

“You’re... fucking kidding me, right?” He asks, staring at my fist that is meant to be a rock because, damn it, I will not take it so easily!

“This is the fairest way to decide,” I say with a confident nod, happy with my idea to fix our problem.

Leave it to us to go from hot grinding to playing a game of rock, paper, scissors to decide who bottoms first. The sad thing is, I’m not at all shocked it has turned out like this and something tells me Quinton isn’t either, because he easily gives in.

“You’re such a child,” he snorts, yet holds up his fist, anyway. Yep, don’t mind us, two guys with raging boners playing a game made for children.

“For your sake, you better hope not,” I tease before chanting. “Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

I scowl at the paper he puts out that beats my rock. Come on, the world can’t hate me that much, right?

The demon spawn grins. “One step closer, Princess.”

“Shut up, I said best two out of three!” And it’s my turn to grin at the scissors that I crush with a rock.

Our points are even and it makes me wonder if the universe is in on this because what are the chances that we’re even? I chant once again, praying to whatever being will listen to please allow me some dignity here.

However, I know the universe is involved because its favorite thing to do is torment me and I am certainly tormented upon seeing the rock that crushes my scissors, sealing my fate. Fuck you too, universe.

“Princess till the end,” Quinton snickers around a triumphant grin that has me flailing my legs angrily.

“One more!” I demand, only to be shut up by his lips crashing against mine.

Apparently, Quinton is not keen on the idea of playing childish games when he is ready to show me that this won’t be so bad. I actually whine when Quinton retreats to go on a scavenger hunt. How he can walk around naked without feeling any shame is beyond me. Not that I don’t enjoy the view, but let’s not tell him that.

“What are you looking for?” I ask when the boy opens Langley’s bedside drawer. He reveals a condom and lube. “How did you know Langley even had any?”

“Langley has a girlfriend,” Quinton replies, having returned to hover over me. “And, unlike you, I’d like to think he’s not a complete idiot and actually takes his time to make sure she feels good, too. I’m glad to have been proven correct.”

“I’m not ok with him getting more of a compliment than I ever will,” I point out.

Quinton rolls his eyes and returns to kissing me because, apparently, the idea of me thinking about anything other than sex with the almighty Quinton Underwood is insanity and I must be disciplined.

Our lips are connected yet again, though Quinton only remains there for a second. Soon, he’s kissing down my neck, marking whatever piece of skin he can get his teeth on. There’s a popping sound beside me I know belongs

to the bottle. I do my best to keep my eyes shut because if I were to see what Quinton's preparing to do, my pride may rear up, kick me in the back, and force us to stop. Honestly, I'm not really ok with that.

Quinton's hands part my shaking thighs. Getting each other off is one thing; sex is a whole other story. I feel like drowning myself in the tub after realizing that I'm about to lose my virginity to my so-called arch nemesis. I actually cover my face whenever I feel Quinton press my legs forward.

"Stop that," Quinton huffs, to which I shake my head stubbornly.

"Like I could watch."

I bite my lip to keep back any unpleasant sounds I may make because it's hard not to curse him out right now when his finger is shattering my personal bubble. But then Quinton leans forward, pressing our overheated bodies together. He pulls my hands from my face.

"Don't hide from me," Quinton orders, as breathless and aroused as I am. He leans forward to rest his forehead against mine. He's shaking, too, reminding me this is a first for both of us. We're figuring this out together.

The perfect bastard takes it onto himself to help me better enjoy myself. He does this by kissing down my chest. Moving further and further down, he kisses my heaving stomach, then lower. Now, my thighs part, hoping to coax Quinton closer. I let out all forms of grunts and moans as my hands bury themselves in the sheets beside me. I grip onto whatever can remind me that this is reality. We're really here, panicked and happy and nervous and excited, so much at once it's maddening.

Then the discomfort fades in response to a surprising pleasure. Furious fire runs through my veins. Sadly, the orgasm that I feel nearing is not granted. Quinton retreats. I groan from the loss of his attention.

"What the hell?" I ask, breathless. "Don't stop, asshole."

Probably not the best choice of words when Quinton suddenly curls his fingers. My legs shake from the electrifying sensation, earning a mixture of a yelp and a moan from me. His smug expression speaks more than words and it has me grumbling all sorts of curses at him. Quinton rolls his eyes, then leans down to kiss me apologetically. I shall accept his apology purely because getting off on my own is unacceptable at the moment.

“You’ll get yours soon enough,” I hiss at the smug boy, who cradles my trembling highs. He presses forward and I know what comes next. The thought makes my breath catch.

“Yeah, next time, Princess.”

Hearing *next time* makes me smile. As if he knows what I’m thinking, he smiles back. The expression relaxes me, however, that relaxation turns to tension when he pushes forward. My entire body tenses, eyes widen, even watering at the foreign feeling.

“You have to relax, Aron,” he says, breathless. The sound has my heart skipping. It’s unlike him. I like it.

I squirm a bit, unsure of this new yet oddly okay feeling. I don’t know how to describe it. I wish I had the words to describe any of this, to know if what I’m feeling is natural, if what we’re doing is right or if there is a right way. No one really prepares us for these moments. They expect us to know, to understand every little aspect about sex, but here I am, unsure of any of it.

Quinton doesn’t move, waiting for signs of too much discomfort. I feel his entire body trembling, just like mine. It’s as if I can feel what he’s thinking, coursing through me along with my own thoughts, and I know it isn’t just me who is both excited, embarrassed, and nervous. The thought is enough

to have me give him a nod and a soft, ‘move it, jerk’ that has him shaking his head at me.

“Forever the Princess,” he says fondly before doing as I said.

My body twists at the unexpected pressure and pleasure igniting within me. At first, our bodies can’t keep up with each other. Give me some credit; I’ve never done this before. My hips can’t decide what they want. Holding my legs, Quinton guides us into a powerful rhythm that has my voice ranging in volume. For once, he can’t keep himself completely quiet either. His grunts and groans escape him whenever something feels too good. The sounds are as intense as the feeling of his hips meeting mine.

A sense of pride washes over me, knowing that it’s me he’s making those noises for. That is enough to make this ok, so long as I can keep hearing my name on his lips my pride can take the back seat and let me enjoy the sensations.

We’re too young, too inexperienced, and too pent up to keep up the fast pace that our bodies desire. With each breath, I feel myself growing closer, eyes becoming blinded from pleasure, fire coursing through my veins so hot it could scorch. My thighs tremble, hands reaching up to touch whatever they can, hoping to remind me that the one above me is Quinton. This is real, and I am not in some very imaginative coma.

I want him closer. I want to feel him. I want him near, so I reach up to pull him down for a messy kiss, full of affection that will have me blushing in the morning. Quinton must be close and desperate because his hand falls between us, touching me. The sudden attention has my body twitching as he attempts to help finish me.

If I was loud before, I don’t know what to call myself now, relentlessly vocal? Because my voice reaches heights I didn’t know were possible.

Good thing everyone else is still in class.

The edge that has been so near to me finally hits. An orgasm so violent that all I can do is release a pathetic whine. My body melts into his. His hips finally still against mine as he speaks my name against the hollow of my throat.

I fall back onto the bed I hadn't even realized I was off of, eyes wide, chest heaving, and body still shaking. Quinton falls beside me; our bodies flush against one another as we heave breath after breath.

Holy shit. Holy shit.

I push myself up onto my elbows. "I'm all sticky."

Quinton's eyes are shut, continuing to come down from his high. Not that I'm down yet either. My blood's still racing, heart soaring, and mind basically filled with nothing but unclean thoughts. Maybe my eyes continue looking over the boy beside me, attempting to memorize everything, see what I may have missed before, like how he has two beauty marks below his collarbone on his left side or the mark right above his hip.

With a smirk, Quinton opens his eyes at half-mast. "Sounds like a personal problem."

"This conversation seems oddly familiar."

"It does," he grunts, slowly sitting himself up as I did. "I swear to God if you wipe semen on me again."

"Because after what we did, that's so bad!" I say in a high-pitched tone that has me coughing afterwards.

Ok, voice is not healed, and it makes me flush at the thought of how loud I must have been in order for my voice to be out of order.

As if he can read minds, Quinton smirks, then hops off the bed. "Where are you going?"

“To shower,” he states.

I nod, flushing a bit when my eyes, without my permission, admire his body again. Having caught my check out, Quinton smirks but says nothing as he grabs his clothes and heads to the bathroom. He doesn’t close the door behind him. Maybe I grab my own clothes while following him, but who cares if we get a shower together. After what we did, there’s nothing more personal.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Have you ever tried burning an ant beneath a magnifying glass?

Have you ever imagined yourself as the ant?

If not, do so now so you can imagine how I feel as I stare wide-eyed at Langley, who stares as wide-eyed back at me after I've emerged from our restroom with a pair of loose sweats on my hips and Quinton behind me with nothing but a towel on.

Yep, an ant beneath a magnifying glass is how I feel. I become red from my toes to the tip of my ears.

Langley's jaw drops and he stutters, "Uh... s-sorry, did I... should I..."

"You didn't interrupt anything," Quinton says, shielding himself within the bathroom, away from Langley's gaze as he changes from the towel to his clothes. He exits the restroom, brushing past me to take a seat at the desk, where his eyes remain on Langley, whose eyes are now on the floor.

“Uh... that’s good, I guess,” Langley hums, hopping from one foot to the other. I’m still standing wide-eyed in the doorway, questioning all my life choices.

“Are you going to put some clothes on?” Quinton asks, breaking me from my trance.

Nodding, I eagerly slam the door shut behind me to hide in the bathroom, mentally panicking as I try to redress myself. However, even after I successfully put on my attire without slipping, I stand before the sink, head hung over the porcelain, taking in deep breaths.

Holy shit, Langley totally knows what happened. He freaking knows! I am going to be made fun of for the rest of my life. I’m never going to live this down! He’s going to bring it up every chance he gets. I’m dead. May I rest in peace.

After about 10 minutes of panic, I peek out of the door to see Langley on his bed, facing Quinton. The two are speaking and I realize that they’ve never really talked before. I mean, they did back when Quinton and I were ‘arch enemies’, but never since we began getting along. I watch on in fascination. How exactly are they communicating? Quinton is so Quinton-like while Langley is not Quinton-like.

“How long do you think he’s going to watch us talk?” Langley asks, his attention on Quinton.

“He’s weird, so give him another five minutes,” Quinton replies.

Grunting, I kick open the door to make my way out. Both boys look at me, one with a huge grin and the other with a smirk.

“I just haven’t seen you two talk before,” I grumble, crossing my arms as if to defend myself.

“That’s because you always want to be alone with him,” Langley sings and, with a flick of his wrist, brings a huge blush to my face. My blush worsens from the jerk, tossing his box of condoms into the air and catching them. “And now I see why.”

“Shut up! You’re the same with Ariel,” I accuse him.

He holds his hands up in surrender. “I admit to that. Why are you acting so shy about it though?”

“A Princess must always act like one, don’t you agree?” Quinton adds, his grin matching Langley’s.

Ok, now I know why these two never talked. I never let them because I knew this would happen!

“Quinton, leave,” I order, pointing at the door. “I’m not ok with the two of you making friends.”

“I think it’s a great idea!” Langley shouts, throwing his arms into the air, swinging the condoms some more, too. I flip the boy off even as he speaks. “Quinton and I definitely need to spend more time together, don’t you think?”

“Definitely.” Quinton nods.

“Oh! Have you ever seen any of Aron’s childhood photos?” Langley asks, becoming excited.

I frantically run after the boy when he reaches for my laptop. I’d say we fought over it, but that would be a lie. Quinton jumps in, easily keeping me back by wrapping his arms around me.

“I know his password so we can totally look through his embarrassing photos together,” Langley says, eagerly nodding.

“I feel we are going to be great friends.”

“Fuck you both!” I holler, kicking my legs until my hips practically scream at me to stop. I do just that and glare at Quinton. He releases me.

Huffing, I look to Langley, who has my laptop in his lap, then Quinton, who smirks and has the audacity to ask, “Hips sore, Your Highness?”

Langley howls with such laughter that he’s left crying and gasping for air. I’m flushing redder than I probably ever have as I grumble, “I am going to kill you.”

Quinton hums as if to say, ‘sure princess.’ Yes, the princess is added because we all know he’d tack that on just to agitate me more.

Grumbling, I stomp over to the still laughing Langley to retrieve my laptop and take it back to its rightful place, which for now is locked in my arms. I jump on my bed. That is changed... wait a second.

“Who changed my bed sheets?” I ask, looking at the made bed that is never made because who makes their bed anymore?

“Quinton did when you were freaking out earlier in the bathroom,” Langley replies, his grin still intact. “Since you two made a mess of it earlier.”

Blushing, I look at Quinton. He has now taken a seat at the edge of my bed. I kick him softly with my foot. He shrugs.

“I really don’t want to spoil the mood, but I need to ask...” Langley hums, catching both of our attentions with his sudden change of tone. “You two are serious, then?”

He’s looking more at Quinton than me. I feel the question was actually directed towards Quinton. Quinton sits up straight and says with a confidence that makes my toes curl, “We are.”

We are. It’s sad how those words make me smile. We are... serious, the both of us.

“Not to make you feel weird or anything, Aron,” Langley says, sending me a small smile before setting a stern gaze on Quinton that has me blinking in confusion. “I may not be the best at physical confrontations, but I assure you that if you mess with my best friend in any way, I will make your life a living hell.”

My jaw drops. Quinton nods and replies with, “And I assure you it won’t come to that.”

Again, he says nice things, and it’s making me feel all mushy. Not to mention Langley does that shit!

“Do we need a group hug?” I ask, looking between the two who have been in an eye lock for, like, five minutes. “I feel we are having a moment.”

“That you ruined.” Langley laughs.

“Hey, you started it and I finished it. Speaking of starting things, don’t treat me like I’m incapable of handling myself. It is totally weird!” Even if it isn’t and I am beyond happy to have myself such an amazing friend.

Langley places a dramatic hand over his heart. “But you are incapable of handling yourself, Your Highness.”

“Shut it!” I laugh, reaching to my desk in order to throw a notebook at him. He dodges the notebook with ease. Not that I’m ungrateful, actually, I’m trying to think of ways to thank my best friend, who sure as hell is proving why he’s my only one. The saying is true; it’s quality not quantity.

The rest of the evening was spent with the three of us hanging out, although Langley tried to leave once or twice until I informed him he really wasn’t bothering us. As Langley is attempting to teach Quinton how to play video games, I’m left in thought. What am I thinking about? Raina. I may have scared her off, but that doesn’t mean the problem is solved. If anything, I most likely made it worse. I’d say she already leaked the

picture, but if that were the case, I would have been informed. Clearly she has done nothing with it, but that doesn't mean that she won't.

Quinton says he'll be alright. Acting like the idea of her cheating off him during finals doesn't bother him, but it has to. If he gets caught, he will be expelled. Just because we all know Quinton could get away with cheating if he wanted, that doesn't mean Raina can. The thought of her possibly ruining his future because of me makes my stomach churn.

However, as I sit here, I wonder if we've been looking at this the wrong way. Raina is simply a scared girl who wants to pass and remain at Thorton's. She's not some evil incarnate, like Quinton. Perhaps she was too scared to ask Quinton for help or thought the only way she could pass was by cheating. Quinton is a freaking genius and finals are still a month away! If they studied together, I'm sure she could pass her finals. That could be our solution. We just need to make her believe she can pass without cheating. Who better to help her do that than the almighty Quinton?

Langley hops up suddenly to announce that he is going to take a shower. Before he enters the room, he looks back at the two of us to ask, "I will not find used condoms or something in there, am I?"

"Get your damn shower!" I order, throwing a pillow at him that whacks him in the ass. He cackles like the maniac that we all know he is before going into the bathroom.

Once we both know the boy is taking his shower rather than listening to us, Quinton looks at me. As if he can read minds, he says what has been lingering within my mind for some time this evening, "You know we're going to have to speak with Raina tomorrow."

I nod in agreement. "I was thinking though—"

"You can do that?"

I don’t bother that with a response. “Raina is just a scared girl who doesn’t want to be kicked out of Thorton’s. I doubt she means any actual harm to us, so why don’t you help her?”

Quinton’s face contorts into that of utter disgust. “Excuse me?”

I can’t help but laugh at how appalled he sounds. “Help her,” I repeat. “Tell her you two will study together, help her in her subjects, and see if there’s any way you can keep her from failing her finals without cheating. She seems like a nice girl—”

“What kind of nice girl black mails someone?” Quinton hisses, giving me an incredulous look. He’s at my side now, peering at me as if I’ve lost my mind. He should know I’ve never had it to begin with!

“She’s scared and desperate. I think if she had truly awful intentions, she would have leaked the photo already, don’t you?”

My question makes enough sense for Quinton to mull over my suggestion. He eyes me suspiciously, bites at his bottom lip in contemplation before letting out a heavy sigh, signaling that I won before he even bites out, “Fine.”

I pat him on the back. “I knew you had some kindness in you.”

“But if she makes a move to cheat off me or reveal the photograph...”

“What will you do?” I ask in all seriousness, because there isn’t much either of us can do. If she leaks the photo, the press will have it out in a second. The internet will explode in minutes. The news will spread like wildfire. There’s nothing we can do.

He doesn’t give me a response. I suppose it’s the thought that counts? Huffing, Quinton turns away from me, his jaw showing that beneath his lips he’s grinding his teeth in annoyance. Of course he is, he’s being played by someone. I’m surprised he hasn’t gone ballistic on her ass.

“It’s getting late,” he says, looking at the clock that shows me it is nearing the time for us to sign back into our dorms. I watch, saddened, when Quinton gets up in order to leave. I follow him to the door, where we linger for a moment in silence.

“I’ll see you in the library tomorrow,” he says. It doesn’t sound like a question, but not an order either.

“Yeah, ok.”

Before he gets the chance to open the door, I press a quick kiss to his lips that leaves him puzzled.

“What was that for?” He asks.

I shrug. “Do I need a reason to kiss you?”

“I guess not,” he replies, then leans down for another more eager and longer kiss that has the both of us breathing heavily afterwards. I smile. He smiles back, the sight making my heart practically jump out of my throat. He leaves afterwards, only moments before Langley appears freshly cleaned from the showers.

“What’s with the stupid face?” Langley asks, looking at me. I’ve yet to walk away from the door even after it has closed.

“Huh?” I ask, running my hands over my face as if I could feel this ‘stupid’ he speaks of.

“Your face,” he laughs, gesturing to said face. “You look stupid.”

“At least I’m not stupid.”

Langley snorts. “Nice comeback.”

“Thanks, I worked hard on it.”

I try to get rid of this ‘stupid face’ by putting on a video game that I play late into the evening. You’d think after my rigorous activities earlier that I’d be able to fall asleep easily. That is definitely not the case. Instead, I can’t

shut my eyes. Every time I do, I envision Quinton there, face flushed, chest heaving, eyes half mast as they focus on me, full of lust and want and everything that I felt in that moment. It has me tossing and turning, imagining all kinds of things with him, until my phone lights up.

I arch a curious brow at the device that shows it is nearing one in the morning, so who the hell could be texting me? I open the message only to realize that I am so hopelessly infatuated with this guy that it's actually sickening. His text is simple, yet it holds more meaning than it lets on.

Quinton: Can't sleep.

You'd think I'd be bothered by such a little text, but I'm not. He can't sleep, so he texts me? My cheeks hurt from how hard I'm smiling.

Aron: Me either, had myself a nightmare with your face in it.

Quinton: Funny, I was about to say the same to you.

Would it be incredibly conceited to think that I'm not the only one remembering what we did earlier? My fingers want to type out these cheesy messages full of I like you and I miss you, but I think he already knows that. I think we both know it. Why else would we stay up for the next two hours, sending useless messages back and forth? The temptation remains, the desire to see how he'll react to one of those cheesy messages. Does he feel the same? My fingers type of three little words that, the moment I send them, makes me panic.

Aron: I miss you.

Yet again, I desperately wish that I could delete my sent text. Ah! I shouldn't have sent it. I should have left him be. He's going to call me a princess or something and act all high and mighty shit.

I sit up so fast I give myself whiplash. Groaning, I fall back into bed while rubbing my neck. Langley stirs in his sleep. I stare at him until he grows

quiet. Grumbling, I throw the blanket over my face like that would help the embarrassment eating away at my stomach. Thinking that he'd not respond, I get ready to pass out, but there's a buzzing sound telling me I've received a text.

Unsure if I want to read it, I hesitantly reach for the phone, stare at it for a good five minutes before finally opening the text that knocks the breath right out of my lungs.

Quinton: The feeling's mutual.

Of course, he couldn't simply say I miss you too, but reading it still makes my cheeks flare up, my heart beat rapidly, and my toes curl. I slam a pillow over my face, then peek over the pillow to read over the message about a dozen times before he sends one more.

Quinton: Goodnight, Princess.

Aron: Goodnight, Asshole.

I was tired earlier. Now the blood coursing through my veins is strong enough to keep me awake for centuries. I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling until exhaustion overtakes me. I pass out with a smile on my face that the most satanic man to ever walk the earth put there.

The smile remains when I wake up the next morning, regardless of how tired I feel. Langley keeps giving me skeptical looks. I believe he thinks I'm going to prank him because he's constantly looking over his shoulders.

I roll my eyes at him and say on the way to class, "I'm not going to prank you."

"Seems like you are," he says, gesturing at my wide grin. "You've been grinning like that all morning."

"I have my good days."

"Makes me nauseous."

“Shut up,” I laugh, shoving the laughing boy from me.

The smile doesn’t leave my face all day. Not even at lunch when I know we will have to talk to Raina. I wave goodbye to Ariel and Langley, both oblivious to the turmoil I am about to face. I keep my fingers crossed on the way to the library. Please let this work!

As expected, Raina sits across from Quinton this time. I smirk but wipe the expression from my face because we need her in a good mood. She appears nervous, shifting in her seat, and even jumps when spotting me sitting next to Quinton. My fingers twitch with the desire to grab his hand, to hold it in my own and feel his warmth. Beneath the table, he grabs my hand and interlocks our fingers. I have to hold my other hand over my lips to hide the idiotic smile on my face. This isn’t really the time to act all lovey-dovey.

“So...” I hum, peering at Raina. She keeps her eyes glued to the table. Her flushed face screams embarrassment, along with the quivering and her hands being incapable of deciding whether to keep still or fidget.

“S-So,” she stutters, looking at me. The moment her eyes lock with mine, she shivers and averts her gaze. Geesh, I didn’t mean to traumatize her! Even if a part of me kind of likes that, I did considering all the trouble that has been caused.

“You have a picture, right?” I ask, seeing as Quinton refuses to open his mouth for once.

She hesitates before answering with a soft, “Yes.”

“It’s not nice to blackmail.”

She nods.

“If you agree, then why are you doing it?” I ask, just in case my assumption is entirely off base. She may have another reason, you never

know.

Raina sways back and forth. She nibbles at her bottom lip. Quinton and I watch the girl rub her hands together in a panicked state. Taking a deep breath, she admits, “I did badly on the midterms. My grades are fine now, b-but if I fail the finals, if I so much as get C’s, I will lose my scholarship. I’ll be kicked out of Thorton’s. I’m so sorry, but I...” Her eyes look between the two of us as they fill up with water. “I can’t afford that. I worked so hard and I know there was that enormous scandal saying I cheated my way in, but I didn’t! I swear I didn’t! After all the work I put in, the stress from it all made me cave. My parents...my parents work two jobs to keep me here so I can’t let them down. You have to understand. Please, I’m so sorry! I have to stay here, I do.”

By the end of it, she’s crying hysterically into her hands. A part of me feels bad for her. I understand the feeling of not wanting to disappoint your parents. I understand now everyone is fortunate enough to get into Thorton’s, and those without connections work their asses off to get in. At the same time, she blackmailed us, is technically still doing so because she has a picture.

“Why couldn’t you ask Quinton to study with you?” I inquire, leaning back in the chair while maintaining the hand hold with Quinton. I like the way his hand feels in mine, the warmth and the occasional twitch of his fingers as they rub soothing circles into my hand.

Raina peers at Quinton, who glares back. I kick him beneath the table. He looks at me with an expression that tells me he is doing his best not to beat her to death with a book. Ok, so he would never disgrace a book in such a manner, but he’d find a weapon to make it work.

“I... I was actually planning to the d-day that I saw you two,” she sputters out nervously, turning her gaze to me. “I thought it was strange seeing you two together. I just happened to be there when you two...” Again, she looks between us. This time, she holds up her hands to meld them together as if to reenact the kiss with her hands. “K-Kissed.”

“Go on,” Quinton orders.

“I took the photo because, well, Quinton is really intimidating.”

I laugh until Quinton glares at me for not taking this seriously. I am! It’s just that it’s so true. Raina is obviously not the most outgoing of people, so of course she’d be nervous around Quinton. He is the very definition of intimidating and, in my opinion, demonic.

“I agree with that.” I chuckle.

“I’ve been so nervous and stressed, and it seemed like the only option. You...you aren’t going to expel me, are you? D-Did you tell your dad?” she asks, voice trembling.. Actually, her entire body trembles. Yep, I traumatized her. Part of me feels bad, I swear.

“No, no, no,” I answer, shaking my head. “Just...Quinton and I talked about it—”

Quinton rolls his eyes.

“And we decided that if you delete the photo, any and all copies you have of them, Quinton will help you study for the finals.”

“R-Really?” Raina squeaks.

“Yes. You have a month to do it, and who better to help get your grades up than this dork?” I jab said dork with my thumb. He grunts.

Raina’s eyes grow large. Tears trickle down her red cheeks. I panic a bit because why the hell is she crying again? Was that not a good enough offer? Did I say something wrong?

“Y-You’re so kind... why are you s-so nice? I t-tried to blackmail you,” she cries.

“Ah, well... I mean…you just seemed like a scared girl and if you really wanted to do something bad to me, you would have already done it.”

She’s too busy crying to answer me. Quinton and I sit awkwardly across from her. Ok, so I sit awkwardly. Quinton definitely enjoys the tears based on his wicked smile. I pinch his hand to which he pinches me back.

“Stop looking so happy,” I hiss into his ear.

“She deserves a little scare,” Quinton argues.

Our bickering is put on pause when Raina pulls out her phone to slide the device across the table. Picking it up, I search through her pictures to find the one she has of us. A professional photographer definitely didn’t take it, but one can tell that it’s me kissing another boy. Quinton could get away with saying it isn’t him, but there’s no denying I’m involved.

“Is this the only copy?” Quinton asks, eyeing the girl like a predator. The poor thing already looks ready to piss herself. He isn’t helping! “How do we know you don’t have this linked to other devices or some shit?”

Some shit? He said that because he doesn’t know any social networking sites, didn’t he? Does he even have apps on his phone? I want to try one of the many puppy filters on him!

As I’m imagining how utterly adorable Quinton would be with puppy ears, Raina replies, “I don’t have it linked to anything, I swear! That’s the only one. Y-You can check my apps, anything you want.”

And check Quinton did. He went through her texts, every linked site she had with her phone, even insisted she show him her bag in case she had actual hard copies. Man, he is thorough. About fifteen minutes later Quinton dubbed her clean, and the photograph was erased.

“Now that that’s settled!” I sing, looking between Quinton, who still seems ready to blow a top, and Raina, who is a sobbing mess. “Let’s shake hands and be friends.”

Quinton’s nose wrinkles in distaste. Raina giggles. “You’re surprisingly kind, Your Highness,” she says.

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“Well, you only really hang out with Langley and his girlfriend. The thing with Gabby spread and a lot of the students thought you to be cold and cruel —” Yeah, well, they didn’t know the whole story. “You’re our future king, so the students find you a bit intimidating as well.”

“Really?” I ask that with a bit too much enthusiasm. Quinton whacks me over the back of the head for it.

Raina nods.

“I just thought that it would be silly for us to be worrying so much when we know you did it because you felt cornered. Sometimes people lose their way and do something a bit stupid, but that doesn’t mean you should hate them for it, right?” At least, that’s how I feel. I look between the two of them to see if they agree. Quinton sighs heavily, but nods. Raina thinks it over for a second before nodding too and smiling back at me.

“T-Thank you, Your Highness,” she sniffles, continuing to wipe away her tears.

“I told you Aron is fine!”

The studying begins after Raina composes herself. Quinton remains stiff throughout it all, still not entirely content with my plan. Raina takes a lot of notes, listens carefully, and occasionally asks questions, though she is very timid about it. I suspect it’ll take some time for her to openly ask questions.

Right now she’s still a bit of a mess, wiping at her tears and trying her best to return to normal.

As they study, a sense of triumph washes over me. Our problem has been fixed. Hopefully, so has Raina’s. She may have blackmailed us, may have made us fight and worry over what might happen, but she was just scared and lost. Even if that’s really naïve, I’d like to imagine that, if I ever felt so cornered, someone would come to my aid as well.

“Don’t you think we were too easy on her?” Quinton asks after Raina leaves to go to lunch alone.

I shrug. “Maybe, but sometimes a harsh punishment isn’t necessary. Sometimes what you need most is a gentle nudge in the right direction.”

Quinton stares at me quizzically before snorting and asking, “Who are you and what have you done with Aron?”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?” I shout, scowling.

“It means you’re sounding surprisingly intelligent.”

I gasp. “Are you calling me smart?”

“I’m saying you’re an imposter.”

I laugh and playfully nudge him with my elbow. “Come on, just say I did a good job.” He won’t look at me, so I tug on his arm. He tries to put his books in his backpack, but I continue tugging.

“Come on, Quinny, say it. Say I did a good job, say I did a good.” I continue to pester the boy until he spins us around so that if anyone walks towards us, all they’d see is his back. I heat up when his lips connect with mine in a long but completely innocent kiss that is as exciting as all the others, which should make me feel totally pathetic, but I quite enjoy it.

Quinton retreats, although remains close enough to breathe the next few words against my lips, “You did good, Aron.”

The smile from this morning returns. The smile remains even after we say our goodbyes. He heads for his lunch and I go to class. I spend the rest of the day with my mind on the black-eyed demon. By the constant texts that go back and forth between us, I think I can safely say that his mind isn't exactly on school work either.

Yeah, it's safe to say we're both hopeless.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I'm glad things worked out," Autumn says over the phone. "Quinny is probably still pretty pissed, huh?"

"Pissed is an understatement." I laugh, thinking of the days that we've spent studying with Raina.

She takes up most of our time, but at least now we know she doesn't have something over us. Quinton hasn't grown to like her in the least. A week has passed, and he has yet to stop glaring at her. I'm surprised he hasn't burned a hole through her skull.

The weekend is here, meaning that he'll be in less of a foul mood because we made an agreement not to study with her on the weekends. I'm getting ready to head to the gym with Langley, Quinton, and Ariel to play some basketball. Yeah, Langley and Quinton made plans for us to hang out playing basketball. End me because my best friend is making friends with my boyfriend and, damn it, I can't handle both of their teasing! Ariel

giggles maniacally in the background. Occasionally she joins in on the Make-Aron's-Life-A-Living-Hell fest.

"I suppose Quinton can never do anything without overdoing it." Autumn giggles. "As happy as I am to hear that your problem with Raina is solved. I am much more eager to hear about how your relationship is going!"

"No. I am not supplying you with anything! Last time, you tricked the truth out of me."

"I'm just curious about your love life. Is it going well? Has anyone made the move yet?"

"The move?" I repeat.

"You know, the attempt to go further in the relationship."

We remain silent for a long moment before she feels the need to clarify. "Sex. The dirty deed. The fornication dance."

Thank god she isn't here to see the embarrassing blush on my face. I'm kicking my dirty laundry into the basket in the bathroom while attempting to pull on some clothes and balance the phone between my ear and my shoulder. "That is none of your damn business!"

"Aw, I wanted to swap war stories," she says. I envision her pouting on the other end of the line, making me roll my eyes. Now that I think about Autumn and Quinton dated so they might have…

"So, you two had sex?" I ask, even if I already feel I know the answer. Part of me is jealous. I can't lie, but I've taken such a liking to Autumn. She's funny, kind and clearly Quinton's best friend.

"Yeah, we dated for two years and towards the end, we did."

Holy shit, I didn't know they were together for so long.

"If you don't mind my asking," I hum, peering out from the bathroom to find Langley has already left to pick Ariel up at her room. "Why'd you two

break it off?”

Autumn is his best friend. It’s clear she knows him well. She always knows what’s going on between us, meaning Quinton has informed her. She knows when something is wrong, much like I do. She’s his childhood friend who knew about his father from the get-go. It makes me wonder why they ever broke it off.

“Are you trying to find out what to avoid doing?” Autumn asks with a laugh. “To be honest, I’d say we dated because we felt we had to. People always said that best friends made the best couples. Quinton sure as hell never hung out with other girls, so I may have seen myself as special.”

“You are special.” She should know that. Quinton has kept her around all these years, continues to speak to her, and openly admits to her being his best friend. She is special.

Autumn laughs. “I meant special in a romantic sort of way. I know I’m a pretty great friend!”

I roll my eyes. No wonder the two get along. Their egos are huge.

“Anyway, I love Quinny, but we mistook our loyalty for one another as romantic. It’s not like we didn’t have fun while going out, but it almost felt a little tedious to meet the expectations of a romantic relationship. I knew we needed to break it off one day, but I wasn’t sure how or when to do it. I’m sure he was thinking the same. I didn’t want to risk ruining our friendship.” She sighs sadly, most likely reliving the awkward moment of her life. “It really hammered it in that we weren’t meant to be whenever he started talking so animatedly about this blonde-haired, blue-eyed bimbo.”

Blonde-haired blue-eyed bimbo? I don’t recall there being a girl like that around him, or any girls for that matter.

“He showed interest in someone? Who is this girl because she must be one hell of a woman to catch Quinton’s interest.” I laugh.

Autumn falls into a fit of laughter that has me questioning her sanity. She takes deep breaths over the line before she coughs out, “She is actually a he and goes by the name of Aron Vaughn.”

My cheeks explode with heat. I knew the two of them talked about me—no way. Just no way!

“He used to come to me after school, text, or call me to tell me stories of this boy named Aron who constantly bugged him. For some unknown reason, he couldn’t stop himself from answering to his taunts. He claimed to hate this boy, but I know Quinny and I know what he does with the things that he hates. He certainly didn’t, or rather doesn’t, hate him.”

My jaw is scraping against the floor. I desperately try to pull myself together, especially when I hear a knock at the door and the very boy's voice calls out to me we’re speaking of.

Sputtering, Iinform Autumn that Quinton is here, and I have to go. The girl laughs, adding one more comment before hanging up, “I knew after how much he talked about you that my best friend had finally found someone he was actually interested in. It was a relief, so don’t you ever forget that he’s as infatuated with you as you are with him.”

She doesn’t give me time to respond. I probably couldn’t even if I tried. I end up standing there in shock until Quinton grows impatient and opens the door, revealing himself to be in a pair of red basketball shorts and a white top. When he sees me standing in the middle of the room gaping like a fish, he asks, “What’s your problem?”

“N-Nothing!” I lie, shoving my phone into my pocket and exit the room. “Let’s go.”

Giving me an incredulous look, Quinton does as he's told. We walk in silence out of the dorm, receiving a few stares as we do. Quinton and I aren't exactly seen much together after class. Normally the two of us spend time at his dorm unless Taylor is present in which we go to mine. Obviously, some see us leave the library together and word has spread that we aren't at each other's throats anymore. Well, not in the way we used to be.

"It's impossible to go anywhere with you without getting stared at," Quinton comments, looking at me from the corner of his eye with a teasing grin.

"Like I try to get us stared at."

Yet again, my mind is racing with questions. If Quinton spoke of me to Autumn and they broke up because of it, how long has Quinton been interested in me? Clearly, I was interested long before I ever admitted it to myself. Could he have possibly been the same way? Autumn saw everything from the outside. She probably knew before Quinton did he had a crush on me. How long were we dancing around one another, hiding our feelings? For some reason, the idea of Quinton having as much trouble with his feelings as me makes my toes curl. He really is human, after all.

I can't stop myself from constantly checking Quinton out from the corner of my eye. He, being ever so observant, sees this and asks around a sigh, "Why are you staring at me?"

"I'm not staring." Which, technically, isn't a lie. I was continuously looking at him, then away from him, so it's not staring.

"Aron, if you have another fit—"

"I don't have fits!" I jab him in the side with my fingers. He grunts and gives me a look that states 'yes you do.' Ok, I do, but shut up! We all are

allowed our moments.

“Did you and Autumn break up because of me?” I finally blurt out what’s been on my mind since Autumn mentioned it.

Quinton is stumped. Yes, that is right. He is stumped. The world has ended. I can hear the sirens in the air, see the meteors raining from the sky as the world stops spinning and everyone dies. Obviously that isn’t true, but it might as well be by the way Quinton stares wide-eyed at me.

“Did you?” I ask, my voice hardly above a whisper, seeing as we are in public.

Quinton blinks the shock away and asks a question of his own, “What gave you that idea?”

“Autumn said you started talking about a blonde-haired, blue-eyed bimbo named Aron—” I point to me, the so-called blonde-haired, blue-eyed bimbo. “And that’s when she realized you two needed to break it off.”

Quinton’s face scrunches up into one of discomfort and annoyance. I am betting the annoyance is aimed at his best friend who dares to reveal such a secret. I imagine the inner Quinton writing a list of ways to annihilate her for putting him in this situation while I am thinking of getting her a damn award. Does she even realize how often she’s helped me out? She’s my personal relationship guru!

“Quinton,” I call, reaching out to grasp his hand. I actually intertwine our fingers until he quickly brushes it away. It stings, feeling him push me away simply because we’re outside, but part of me thanks him for it. I guess he is the one who has to use his brain.

We have made it to the gym, but he hasn’t answered. I hear the squeaking of shoes and taunting shouts within the building. The two of us stand before one another, a bit away from the doors to allow others to walk in without

brushing past us. Quinton remains silent, his eyes ever moving as if they are physically searching for a way to answer.

“How long...” I don’t know if I want to know the answer to my question. My heart may not handle it. “How long have you liked me?”

Finally, the boy tears his eyes from the world to focus on me. Feeling his gaze makes my body shiver. I wish to curse myself for being affected so easily, but I’m becoming accustomed to it. With Quinton,I am always overly affected and something tells me he’s the same way, which kind of makes it ok.

“Why do you want to know?” he asks.

Not that I want to know since when, more like I want to find out if Quinton was as tormented as I was. How long did I go questioning my feelings and myself while Quinton seemed to know everything? I could never read him while I must have been an open book, like right now. I must be so easy to read because Quinton eventually lets out a long and nervous sigh.

“I don’t know,” he blurts out three words I never imagined he’d say. Quinton knows everything, though. He seems agitated with what he said, like the very idea of not knowing bothers him more than anything, and he ends up running his fingers roughly through his hair. “It’s not like I can pinpoint an exact moment. To be honest, you could argue since we met.”

I go from white as snow to red as a rose in a second.

Quinton doesn’t take his eyes off me as he admits to what we both know we have been feeling since the very beginning. “You could easily say that I was infatuated with you since we first fought. The attraction simply changed in ways I could have never imagined as time went on.”

I can’t even tease him about that because the same goes for me.

Infatuated, yeah, that's definitely what we were in the beginning. We said how much we hated one another; or rather, I did, yet we always managed to be drawn back like magnets. Now here we are, in a relationship we never imagined would come from how we began. Funny how life works like that.

"So..." I hum, smiling like a giddy idiot that has Quinton glaring at me for doing so. "I can say that you were as clueless and confused as I was, even if you didn't always show it?"

His growl gives me an answer.

Laughing, I reach towards him for a kiss, but the sound of voices nearby makes my hand stop midair. We both linger in silence, looking at my hand that was meant to pull us in for a meaningful kiss that would hopefully lead to making out, but had to stop thanks to the fact that we're in public. Then I let my hand do nothing more than a friendly tap on his shoulder. The touch feels forced and leaves my hand feeling cold because I wished for much more.

"I'm not going to tease you about it or anything," I say with a smile. "You know I was a wreck."

"You were pitiful."

"I was trying to be nice here. You're making it really hard," I groan, brushing past the boy to make it into the gym hoping to keep my desire to commit manslaughter from overtaking me. Quinton follows behind me, chuckling.

However, all the taunts and teasing I go through over the weekend is made up for overtime because, honestly, I can handle all the teasing in the world from Quinton and Langley so long as I get to witness the train wreck that always happens whenever Quinton and Raina study together.

Watching Quinton interact with Raina is possibly one of the funniest things I've ever had the pleasure of witnessing. Raina may have become accustomed to me, but definitely not Quinton. She's as skittish as the first day we agreed on this arrangement. The poor girl looks at me with a quivering gaze that practically screams he hates me, which is true. Quinton's glare has yet to subside. He insists on practically hissing everything at her.

I tried telling him to play nice. He responded with a grumble about how she didn't deserve such a thing. I get that he's pissed off, but the point of them studying together is to help Raina pass her finals, not scare the living daylights out of her.

"You know," I hum, looking between Quinton and his prey. I lean towards the boy, who now narrows his eyes on me, even more so when I press my finger to his furrowed brow. "Keep frowning like that and you'll get wrinkles before you're twenty."

Raina giggles until Quinton glares at her, making her stop immediately. He swats my hand away and growls, "I'm not frowning."

"Uh, huh." So Quinton tries to bullshit through the truth too? See, I'm not the only immature one! "So your face is naturally set into pissed off?"

He doesn't reply. Raina sits across from him, doing her best not to smile. When I send her a wink, she risks releasing a short giggle. Quinton rolls his eyes and continues explaining to Raina whatever subject they're discussing. I've been studying on my own mostly, seeing as my grades have improved without Quinton's help. Yes, I do have a brain and it works from time to time. If I do well on the finals, I should get all A's in my classes. If that happens, I am going to shove it in Quinton's face!

To Quinton’s relief, the bell rings, signaling the end of our study hall. Raina thanks us both for our time, gives me a smile, and attempts to show Quinton one as well, but whenever he hisses at her makes her run away with her tail between her legs.

“You really should try to be nicer,” I say, shaking my head.

“No way in hell,” he spits, shoving his belongings into his backpack.

“How do you think she’ll do?” I ask. We’ve all been studying, more them than me. I do better whenever I pace out my studying rather than doing it all at once. Finals are next week and Quinton has been helping her nearly all month.

“Fine. She just needed some help,” he answers with a shrug.

“Does it hurt?” I inquire, earning myself a quizzical stare. “Being helpful to someone must be incredibly painful for a hellspawn.”

Quinton whacks me over the back of the head while I chuckle. “You’re an imbecile,” he huffs.

“I’m your imbecile,” I whisper with a blush. “So that makes you more than an imbecile.”

“It does.” He nods and, damn it, I have the greatest urge to hold his hand or kiss him or, shit, something, anything!

My fingers twitch, much like they’ve been doing for a while now. Every day it becomes harder and harder to hide the relationship between us. I want to be like everyone else, walking down the halls hand in hand, kissing whenever we please and going on dates. I want to do that with Quinton, even if he’d be a total ass throughout all of it. It’s even harder knowing Quinton feels the same way. For once, I’m aware of his feelings. Why else would he purposely brush his hand along mine while we walk? Something

we do a lot, just letting our fingers brush, holding them together for a second just to feel the connection. It leaves me blushing and wanting more.

Before I do anything stupid, like actually listen to my urges and kiss him, Quinton says goodbye. He heads to lunch while I make my way to class. I don't see why I bother going since my mind has dedicated 100% of its power to thinking about Quinton.

I try telling myself to be patient with everything, to wait and in time we'll tell everyone, but will time make a difference? Regardless of how long we wait, the world will find our relationship to be great news in the worst of ways. Our faces will be plastered everywhere, no matter how long we wait. The news will be shocking regardless of time. I try telling myself that we must wait because, even if I don't enjoy thinking about it, there is a chance we won't last. How stupid would it be to announce to the world that I'm dating Quinton and a week later we break it off? Now that would be embarrassing and beyond troublesome.

Not to mention, it's not just me who would be affected by it. My father and my mother will be dragged through the dirt. People will question not only their parenting methods but also their methods as rulers. There are those who will say they raised me wrong, and that's why my interests are what they are, although many know that to be bullshit people love to gossip.

That pisses me off. It pisses me off that I have to consider all this. It pisses me off I can't do something as simple or silly as announce I'm in a relationship without the world blowing up. All this shit shouldn't be that important. It shouldn't matter.

I just feel so done. I'm done with everything, with hiding and sneaking kisses behind locked doors. I'm done with constantly worrying about my image, about my parent's image. All my life I've had expectations. I will

have expectations for the rest of my life. Do I have to give up Quinton because of those expectations? I don't want to do that. Don't want to give up the one thing that every person should have; the opportunity to choose for themselves who they want to spend their life with and if they change their minds, that's their choice, that's their decision and no one else's.

That's normal, right? It's normal for me to think like this. Perhaps it isn't because, honestly, who else goes through this shit other than me?

Looking at Langley, who is not so sneakily peering at his phone beneath his desk with a smile, I feel a twinge of jealousy. He and Ariel are open about their relationship. Hell, she's met his parents as his girlfriend, not a friend from school. They can hold hands, kiss, go on dates whenever they please, and if they break up the next day, it's like any other relationship. It must be nice. I want to know that feeling. I want to know what it's like to be able to grab Quinton whenever I please in front of whomever I please.

Irritated. I feel irritated. This irritation eats away at me until I'm nothing but an angry husk by the end of the day. The last bell rings. I bolt out of the classroom with Langley right behind. Langley is concerned. The emotion's evidence in his eyes. Although he's tried asking me questions throughout the day, I've always said the same thing.

"I'm fine," I repeat to him over and over until about the tenth question when I finally snap at him in a way that I haven't done in a long time. "I said I'm fine, Langley!"

Langley's eyes grow wide, as do mine. I didn't mean to yell at him.

"I'm sorry," I blurt out immediately.

"It's ok." He sighs. A few students passing by attempting to listen in. He huffs at how rude they are before guiding us back to our dorm. It wouldn't really be a good idea to talk about what's on my mind in public.

Once we reach our room, he sits beside me on my bed, waiting patiently for me to admit what's been bugging me all day. It kind of pisses me off he doesn't ask, simply waits for it because we both know I'll tell him, eventually. He's the only person I have to talk to about this, anyway. I could talk to Quinton about it, but I feel like it may bother him. I think he may purposely avoid what he really thinks because he may feel bad for making me feel bad. Know what I mean? It's a confusing feeling.

"I'm tired." I sigh. The sound actually says more than my words. "Do you know how hard it is?"

"How hard what is?" Langley asks.

"Hiding. It must be nice... with Ariel. You can hold her hand, kiss her, go on dates, hell, shout to the world that she's your girlfriend while I..." I run both hands through my hair, tugging at it as if that will somehow help my headache. It made it worse, actually, and I should have known that. "I can't even tell my own parents! It's dumb, right? I'm not like... weird for thinking that it's totally stupid and unfair that I can't say a damn thing about Quinton to anyone without worrying about it?"

"It's not weird at all," Langley says soothingly. "And it isn't fair."

"I should wait, right? What if Quinton and I don't last?" I feel sick asking that. I shake my head to disperse those thoughts because I rather not think about it. How long have we been together officially, about two months? If we include since the kiss, then it'll be nearly three and I'm already fretting over this!

"That's a decision that is meant to be made between you and Quinton," Langley replies, now rubbing my back as if he thinks I'm on the verge of vomiting and maybe I am. The toilet is sounding like a good place to be right now because my head is pounding while my stomach is stirring.

My interest is piqued at his words. I replay them in my head, you and Quinton. I look at the boy, who gives me a kind smile that turns to slight confusion when I ask, “So you don’t think I should speak to my parents about it first?”

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“It’s not just me that would take the heat. My dad would be slammed!” So would my mom, but more so my dad.

Langley shrugs. “Your dad gets slammed all the time anyway by anyone for whatever reason. People always like to blame someone other than themselves. Your dad is basically the trash can where everyone’s dislikes are thrown. Then, when they aren’t so pissed about something, he becomes basically a god. He can handle it, though, always has.”

That’s true. Now that I think about it, my dad is either loved or hated. There’s no in between, really. There are many who adore him, but if he messes up once, they seem to forget all the good he’s done in order to focus on that one thing. Then, whenever he does something great again, they forgive him as if nothing happened. Honestly, won’t that be the same for me? I will be hated for my orientation, but they’d find something to hate, anyway. Langley is right.

“I know it sounds a bit selfish to you, but it isn’t,” Langley says, patting my back. “Your happiness is important too, Aron.”

My happiness is important too.

I nod and nod and nod some more until Langley laughs and informs me that if I keep it up, my head will pop off. Laughing, I sit up straight, my stomach suddenly feeling much better.

“Thanks,” I say to Langley. He holds his hand out for money again. I roll my eyes and swat his hand away. “I’ll help you out when you piss Ariel

off.”

“Which we both know will happen, eventually.” Langley cackles, then looks at me with wide-eyes. “But seriously, you’ll help me when it does happen, right?”

I chuckle and agree to help when the time comes. He thanks me in return and announces that since my freak out is over, he will be leaving to go visit his beloved girlfriend. Just as he’s about to open the door, there’s a knock. Langley grins and looks back at me in order to whisper, “I bet that’s Quinton.”

“Screw you.” I wave at him hoping to make him leave. “It could be anyone.”

But the world hates me because when he opens the door, that’s exactly who it is. Langley lets out a loud and long ‘ha’ before placing his hand on Quinton’s shoulder while saying, “You and Aron have something to discuss. As the man who took his virginity—”

“Fuck off, Langley!”

“He is your responsibility.” Langley then claps his hands together and prays. “May any potential god have mercy on your soul.”

I get up to chase after the boy, but Quinton stops me in the doorway. Langley runs away while I’m shouting all forms of curse words at him. I imagine Quinton is glaring at me or shaking his head, showing some sign of disapproval because he’d never stoop to such a level. Whatever, Langley is pissing me off, so I’m going to shout at him if I want! Grumbling about good-for-nothing friends, I allow Quinton to drag me back into the room, where he shuts the door behind us.

“What exactly do we have to talk about?” Quinton asks, finally releasing me in order to peer down with narrowed eyes that, honestly, are always

narrowed. I swear 90% of the time he is glaring or narrowing his eyes, usually at me. Should I feel special or concerned?

“Nothing. Langley was just spewing a bunch of garbage,” I reply, not really sure if I should bring the topic up yet.

I can’t imagine what Quinton’s feeling, being the guy that is dating the prince who can’t say that they’re dating. Besides, Quinton would probably try to blow it off, make it seem like it doesn’t bother him, which will agitate me because I know it bothers him. Man, having two stubborn people in a relationship makes things a thousand times more difficult!

Quinton, being the ever so observant hellspawn that he is, arches a brow that tells me he knows that it’s really me that is spewing garbage. Groaning, I make my way to my gaming console, turning it on along with the TV to have an excuse to stall. Quinton crosses his arms but plays along with me, grabbing a controller for himself regardless of the fact that we both know he is terrible at video games. We take a seat beside one another on the floor. The two of us play, him basically half-assing it the whole time because he knows something is up with me, while I try to do my best so I can use my killing streak as a reason to not talk.

Eventually, Quinton grows tired of my silence and asks, much more sternly, “What do we need to talk about?”

I shouldn’t be shocked that he’s bothered by my silence. He doesn’t know what has been on my mind. Aw, is he worried? Quinton is showing genuine concern? Sorry, but has the world ended because there’s no way this is actually happening.

I finally drop what I’m doing to ask my question. “Are you worried about me?”

Quinton places his knuckles to my forehead, pressing into it as if to threaten to punch me while answering, “You should be worried about yourself. Thinking so much when you aren’t used to it must be exhausting.”

“One day, you will admit to being worried about me.” I jab the boy in the nose.

“Yeah, when pigs fly.”

“I can make that happen. I know people.”

Quinton’s expression tells me he is done with my games. Boo, why does he have to suck the joy out of everything?

Sighing, I turn off the game, set aside both our controllers, and ask a question that I am pretty sure I already know the answer to, “If I weren’t the prince, would we be open about our relationship?”

My question is very to the point, and that may be what makes Quinton freeze for a moment. Normally, I beat around the bush or stutter out my questions, but, as I said earlier, I am done. I just feel irritated about everything. I want to know the answer. No, I want to hear it. Maybe that’s what I need, to hear him say that we’d be open, that we would be normal if we could.

Quinton, maybe because my question was blunt or maybe because he gets the gist that I already know his answer, replies simply, “Yes.”

In a way, the admission hurts. There’s a painful stinging sensation in my chest. However, there’s also a warmth that washes over me at the thought that Quinton would so easily tell the world that he’s dating me, the guy that he used to hate. To help the raging emotion within me, I lean over to capture Quinton’s lips that react immediately with my own. It’s times like these where it’s only about a kiss, tongues lapping with almost a lazy undertone, that I find it somewhat funny how it takes so little to relieve my

stress. A simple, intimate touch from Quinton has my heart soaring and my mind allowing itself a break from haunting thoughts.

Pulling apart, I only want to dive in for another, not that it's a new feeling. In fact, the more I taste Quinton, the more I want, to where it's almost concerning. How much time do we spend together, yet I desperately want more? My cravings cannot be satisfied, so I lean in for another and another until we're hungrily reaching for one another, hands roaming, lips tasting, bodies melding in an intoxicating way that should be illegal.

It isn't until later, after we've had our fun, that I exit the shower with Quinton right behind. Looking back, I ask the boy, "I forgot to ask, but did you talk to your mom?"

With summer break nearly here, I have been trying to make plans for Quinton to come to my place sometime during break. Sadly, I have a lot scheduled. Dad said Quinton could only really afford to stay the week after school ends. I agreed because a week is better than nothing. I grumble at the thought of not seeing Quinton for almost two months.

"Yes," Quinton replies, almost making me trip over my own feet. His hand resting beneath my spine stops me from doing so. He smirks devilishly. I glare back at him, practically saying with my eyes *laugh now, but you will be limping one of these days*. He rolls his eyes. "She doesn't mind my staying with you," he adds.

"Cool," I hum, though part of me is worried about how his mother so easily lets him stay over. She hasn't seen him since last summer. Doesn't she miss him? And what about Quinton? I watch him make his way to my bed, where he removes the messy sheets.

"Doesn't it bother you?" I ask.

"What?"

“Your mom. She hasn’t seen you since last summer,” I reply, wondering if I am pushing him too much. He may not want to talk about it. Sometimes a relationship can’t be fixed.

With a heavy sigh, Quinton pulls out the clean sheets in order to put them on. He doesn’t look back at me, as he replies, “Not really. I’m used it.”

“But you shouldn’t be.” He seems to get ‘used’ to a lot of things that he shouldn’t have to get used to, and that irks me. A child shouldn’t get used to their mother ignoring them. “You should talk to her.”

“Excuse me?” Quinton faces me after finishing making the bed. Good thing he did because, knowing me, I’d just steal Langley’s bed.

Crossing his arms, he waits for a response.

“You should talk to her,” I repeat.

“I heard you the first time. Elaborate,” he orders, as if challenging me to go further and possibly make him angry. He gets annoyed when it comes to stuff about his family, but I’m used to him being mad at me, so who cares!

“Have either of you tried talking to each other?”

His dark expression is answer enough.

“At the very least, stand up and tell her how you feel about this mistreatment, then hopefully you two can sit down and talk about it.”

“It?” Quinton arches a brow.

“Your dad,” I whisper, as if bringing that up is enough to set off a nuclear bomb.

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“See!” I point accusingly at his reaction. “That’s what I’m talking about! You’re avoiding it, but you need to tell her you both went through that trauma. You both were hurt and you both are still hurting, but you aren’t your father. The two of you are all you have left.”

I nod at the end of what I have to say to show that I mean it. I'm serious and he should seriously talk to her. She's hurting, so is Quinton. They need time. Avoiding the topic and not talking about it will only cause more problems. Their relationship may never return to what it used to be, but maybe they can make something new?

Quinton shakes his head, hiding his eyes beneath his hand. He remains silent, even whenever I make my way over to him to wrap my arms around his torso. He lets out what I think is meant as an annoyed grunt when I rest my head on his shoulder, knocking my head against his. Sighing, he allows his arms to fall around my shoulders, his head now resting against mine rather than I knocking them together.

"Fine," he huffs, sounding defeated, but there's a twinge of relief in there. "I'll talk to her this summer."

"Promise, Quinny?" I sing, pressing quick kisses to his neck until he grows tired of my 'lovey' ways and pushes me back.

I laugh while he grunts out, "Promise."

I'm feeling much better compared to earlier today. I cannot say things are settled, but they're certainly heading in that direction.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

So begins hell week—I mean finals week. Two days in and I'm about ready to take the nearest object and gouge my eyes out with it. Oh, the temptation to do so is real. In fact, Langley ends up confiscating all sharp objects from me after I stab my eraser about thirty times with a pen. He said something about keeping the public safe. Fuck the public, it's finals week and we're all dead! Even Quinton is more pissy than usual.

Not to make it sound like I am not doing well. Actually, I am feeling very confident about my finals. Thankfully, we only have 2 a day because for once school is deciding to be kind to us and allow us some time for our brains to function properly. I actually spend little time with Quinton seeing as we're both either studying, helping Raina study or half asleep from studying. See? Everyone knows studying is the worst.

It's the middle of the week, meaning I have two finals left tomorrow, then we get out on Friday, signaling the end of my junior year. Thinking about

being a senior in a few months makes me shiver. Unfortunately, I have to go to college regardless of my own desires. My parents have already collected brochures for schools that they find fitting. I am in for a hell of a lot of school talks this summer. It would be a lie to say that I'm not dreading it.

"Two more," Langley groans, throwing his head back. He rubs his palms against his eyes, yet somehow can walk in a straight line. If I tried that, I'd run into someone.

"Then we have to take them next year and it'll be worse because we'll be seniors." I get punched in the shoulder for my comment.

"Have your parents talked to you about college yet?" Langley asks.

"Let's pretend you never asked that," I hiss, scrunching my nose at the mere thought of the college prep over the summer.

Yes, I have brought my grades up. I am confident enough to say I'll graduate with straight A's, maybe even high honors. Yes, I'll probably be able to get into a great college regardless of who I am, but that does not mean I wish to talk about it. Actually, I rather not think about it either. I've got a year left, so please cut me some slack. Let me enjoy my high school year that's left!

Langley chuckles, "Yeah, my parents have been hounding me about college, too. Ariel and I already talked about it a bit."

"Getting serious, are we?" I smirk, earning myself another punch.

"Shut up. What about you and Quinton?" Now he's the one smirking and I'm glaring. "You two talk about future plans?"

"No, we aren't even seniors yet."

More like I'm not mentally prepared for that step. Quinton could easily get into any college he wants. That doesn't mean he'll follow me or I him.

We both have our own roads to take and deciding our future based on our relationship now is possibly the dumbest idea ever.

“Calm it, killer. I’m just playing with you.” Langley laughs, ruffling my hair. I swat his hand away. “Besides, you’re rich. If you guys go to different schools, just fly him over on the weekends.”

“Like he’d let me do that,” I blurt out, then quickly try to cover my slip up. “Not that I’d want to do that either.”

“Too late. I heard that!” Langley continues to tease me about my admission until we head our separate ways. He’s taking Ariel out into town so the two of them can go to dinner and a movie. Lucky.

I’m returning to my dorm where Quinton and I are meant to meet up when I feel a sudden smack against my neck. Shouting, I pivot on my heel to be met with a pair of obsidian eyes sparkling in amusement.

Growling, I ask while rubbing at my neck, “What the hell Quinton?”

The boy shrugs. “Couldn’t pass it up.”

I peer behind me, wondering how he caught up when I suddenly get it. Grinning, I face Quinton, who gives me a stare that says he already has a feeling that he will not like what I have to say.

With a shit-eating grin, I ask, “Did you run to catch up to me?”

“No.”

“How else could you have gotten to me? You saw me and ran to catch up to me. I know you did! Isn’t that sweet?” I accuse the boy, still grinning.

Quinton dons a peculiar stare. I wonder if it is the fact that I know I’m looking at him like a puppy. It’s sad that I can admit that to myself, that I so openly stare at him like this. I am beyond hopeless.

“Stop staring at me like that,” he hisses to which I totally ignore it and accuse him further of his running.

He denies all accusations, but I know the truth. It makes the sneak attack to my neck worth it. Without thinking much of it, I grab Quinton's hand. Quinton's head snaps towards me, then to our connection. His eyes dart about the courtyard to everyone passing. In an instant, he yanks his hand away, shoving me a tad in the process. I didn't expect his reaction, so I'm left standing on the sidewalk, staring at my now empty hand.

"What the hell are you doing?" He hisses, continuing to observe our surroundings to check for anyone who may have noticed. A few kids seem to have seen his shove and are now probably thinking that we're back to our old fighting ways. None appear to have seen the hand hold, so I don't get why he's acting so agitated.

"I was holding your hand," I answer, stretching my fingers in and out as if to remind them that, yes, they can move and it isn't actually cold. I only feel that way because I had desperately wished to feel Quinton's warmth.

"In public, dumbass."

"It just happened ok and no one saw—"

"This time. Learn to control yourself," he orders and, before I have time to argue, stomps towards the dorms.

For a moment, I remain frozen in place, wondering why he had reacted in such a way. I get that we've agreed to keep ourselves a secret, but accidents happen. I don't get why he's so angry about me grabbing his hand. Is he really as conflicted about our relationship as I am? Does he not get the random urge to kiss regardless of who's watching? To hold hands? Am I the only one to feel this way?

Huffing, I follow him at my own pace. Quinton waits outside my door, tapping his foot impatiently for my arrival. I ignore his glare in order to unlock my room and open it, walking in and slamming the door, although I

know Quinton is behind. The sound of a thunk tells me he caught the door before hitting his face.

“Real mature,” he snaps.

“I could say the same thing to you,” I snarl back.

Hearing me retaliate makes his shoulder tense up. Scoffing, Quinton pinches the bridge of his nose like an angry old man because that’s what he’s acting like!

“What’s your issue?” I ask. “You’re acting like it’s a huge deal.”

“Because it is a huge deal,” Quinton replies. He lets his arms drop to his side, as if he’s astonished that I don’t think the same way. “Listen, I get it, us being a secret sucks.”

Wow, he sounded like a teenager in that sentence.

He continues, “But we can’t let accidents happen in broad daylight. Look what happened last time.”

True. Raina was a tremendous pain in the ass. However, the idea of being so sneaky all the time is exhausting. Even if I remind myself, it doesn’t always mean I won’t forget. We basically have to avoid one another in public to keep me from revealing our secret to the world.

Again, I’m left wondering if Quinton is even having the same problem as me. I get he isn’t the lovey-dovey type, but the idea of him not wanting to do the simplest of things with me makes my chest hurt.

Quinton opens his mouth to speak, to most likely lecture me about something, but my question stops him before he gets the chance, “Do you not feel the same way I do?”

“What do you mean?” He asks, sounding tired. I’m sure he is. We both are. Part of our snappy attitudes can be attributed to this being finals week.

Like I said, he's been more pissy than usual. That may be why he reacted the way he did.

I cross my arms. For some reason, crossing them makes me feel safe, though I don't know what I'm trying to be safe from.

"Don't you have times when you react without thinking about it? I know you aren't into all the cuddling and romantic shit but," I lock eyes with him, hoping to see a reaction because lately I've been getting kind of good at reading him. "Aren't there times when you want to cuddle or hold hands or hug and kiss and do what everyone else does? Sometimes I just," I shrug. "Do it."

Quinton's once furrowed brows soften. His frown forms into a thin line. Biting his lip, he looks away from me in order to run his hand over his face. For a moment, we're both silent as he either thinks over what I said or thinks of how to reply. I don't know, he's doing something over there while I switch my weight from one foot to the other.

Finally, he makes a move and I mean literally. He approaches me to run his lips over mine in a short and soothing kiss. Honestly, I want some more of it, so if he could lean back in, that would be great. I'm about to request he do that when he buries his head into the crock of my neck. I allow my arms to drape over his midsection, listening to him breathe against my skin. "Don't think about it."

"It's hard not to," I hum as I think about it, like how it'd be nice if I could randomly throw my arms around him like this in public. The sadistic part of me imagines doing it in front of all those chasing after him. My lips break out into a grin at the idea of grabbing him and shoving my tongue down his throat while they all cry in the background. Yeah, that would be nice.

My sadistic thoughts are put on hold because of the feeling of Quinton's lips against my neck. Actually, let's face facts here, all my thoughts are put on hold because whenever Quinton is doing any type of physical contact with me, my brain turns to mush.

I have to hold back a whimper when he pulls away. My skin misses the warmth, but he doesn't go far. He rests his forehead against mine and breathes against my lips, "If you focus on that, it'll only make you feel worse."

My gut says he is saying that from experience. That's a bit relieving to hear.

I make no promises to keep my mind off these desires entirely because I probably won't, but I give him a nod to tell him I'll try.

It's much easier to control myself whenever the week finally ends. Finals are over. Summer vacation is here. Langley left very early in the morning because his parents had plans to start their vacation in a week. He promised to take a bunch of pictures to rub it in my face later. How many mental notes have I made to kill Langley? I'm adding another one!

My phone goes off to tell me that the car is here. I call Quinton to inform him. He grunts at me and hangs up. What a jerk! The both of us make it to the front gate a few minutes later. I dislike the idea of what is coming over break, but knowing that I have a little over a week to spend with Quinton at home makes it better.

"I actually think my mom is more excited about you coming over for a visit than me coming home." I scowl at the text my mother sent asking if Quinton would either a.) like any specific food, b.) any movies he's interested in, or c.) anything he'd like to do or go see that she could plan beforehand. She didn't ask me about any of those things!

Quinton smirks. “She has good taste.”

I pinch his leg for that. “Is there anything you’d like to do?”

“Like what?” He asks.

I shrug. “Anything.”

“What do you want to do?” he asks, making me flush.

What? Is he implying that he only wants to go out if I want to? Who was it that said they don’t like romantic shit? I count that as romantic, but he probably doesn’t see it as that. What would I like to do?

“Uh, well, there’s a Beauty and the Beast play I’d like to see,” I mumble, more to myself out of embarrassment than anything else.

What teen wants to go see a play about Beauty and the Beast? This teen apparently. Quinton looks stumped to have heard me admit it. I grumble about how he doesn’t have to go to the play and I could go see it on my own, but…

“Let’s do that,” he insists. “I’m sure your parents won’t mind so long as there’s prior notice.”

“You don’t mind? You don’t have to go with me or anything. I mean, plays aren’t everyone’s thing-“

“Aron,” Quinton interrupts, reaching over to grasp my chin and force me to look at him. I blush at the gaze that is focused on me. “I don’t mind. Tell her we’ll go.”

“O-Ok.” I nod dumbly and reply to her we’d like to go see the play.

I inform Quinton that my parents will tag along but he shrugs, saying he doesn’t mind because he enjoys my parents’ company. I growl back that he’s never admitted to liking my company but only gets a smirk in response. What an ass! The plans are set to see the play later in the week and we arrive at the airport shortly afterwards.

Again, Quinton loves the ride. I find it funny how he looks as intrigued as the first time around. I suppose this is only his third time, so it will take some getting used to. I think that as if we're going to be flying together a lot.

Ok, so we probably will be, but let me deny a few things every now and again!

The ride feels short, with Quinton tagging along. It is a hell of a lot better having someone to talk to, even if we tease one another most of the ride. However, our teasing comes naturally, feels like second nature to me. I like that. It's comfortable being with Quinton. I doubt many people can say that. If I ever told Quinton that I felt comfortable around him, he'd probably think me insane. I think I'm insane because. Honestly, there is nothing 'comfortable' about Quinton, yet here I think that there is. I'm contradicting myself a bunch, aren't I? I should probably shut up.

We arrive at my house in no time. Mother not only gives me a bear hug, but Quinton as well. I cry from laughing so hard as Quinton is taken into a tight embrace that I doubt he will get from anyone but my mother. The boy actually stumbles after she releases him, his eyes wide in surprise. Mom laughs and locks arms with both of us, dragging us inside while asking all sorts of questions.

"Mom!" I shout, having a hard time hearing her when she speaks so fast. We're now at the dining room table, about ready to eat a late lunch or you could call it an early dinner. Father hasn't arrived yet, but I was informed he'd be here shortly.

"One question at a time and let us answer before you ask the next one. Holy shit," I say to her.

“Aron!” she shouts at my use of ‘shit’ to which I roll my eyes. I am 17! I’m going to be a senior and she still tries to lecture me on language. Let’s face it; I will probably get lectured when I’m in my fifties.

Mom asks us all sorts of questions about school, also bringing up the article I was in with Autumn.

“I told you, she’s just a friend! Ask Quinton!” I point at him.

“Autumn is a childhood friend,” Quinton says, crushing my mother’s hope of learning that I have a girlfriend. “She isn’t interested in Aron.”

“Why does that feel like an insult?” I ask, though I am not interested in Autumn like that either. However, it felt like an insult.

Quinton shrugs.

A second later, my mother asks, “Well, what about you Quinton? Are you interested in anyone?”

And let me tell you, the best thing to ever happen to me is the way Quinton actually chokes on his drink at hearing the question. I howl with laughter at his unusual action.

Slapping his chest twice, he dislodges the drink from his throat, then coughs out a hoarse, “Excuse me?”

I am literally crying as he stares wide-eyed at my mother. She’s giving me the best show I’ve ever had. I watch Quinton become utterly stumped on how to reply. If I had asked, or someone from school, I know he’d just be sarcastic or sass back, but this is my mother. He has never acted sassy or sarcastic around her. Yeah, he’ll tease me, but he is incredibly respectful to her and my father. I give him props for that. However, now he doesn’t know how to reply without his normal fallback.

“You’re a good-looking boy,” Mom says. Don’t feed his ego! “You’re smart and a very nice young man. There must be someone you’re interested

in. Aron!" She points at me, but I'm still laughing. "He's your friend, you must know."

Oh, sweet revenge! Sweet, sweet revenge! I snap my neck back to look at the boy at my side. He glares with such intensity that I can physically feel heat.

Leaning back in my chair, I shrug and reply in a taunting manner, "He has his eyes on someone."

Now Quinton is kicking me beneath the table.

"Totally out of his league!" I copy him, shoving a finger in his nose that he swats away. My mother giggles across the table, insisting I reveal more. "They're pretty awesome even if Quinton never admits it and mega hot." Now I see why he was saying it. It's nice flustering him like this! "He should appreciate that they give him the time of day.

"You two are so cute," Mom giggles, making us both stare at her quizzically. "You always act like an old married couple."

"Come on, Mom..." I sigh, shaking my head while Quinton does the same. "You're so embarrassing."

"I'm your mother. It's my job to be embarrassing," she says, sounding proud, and I bet she is.

After she gave me the best show of my life, she talks about our plans to see the play on Wednesday evening. Dad joins us not long after we arrive. I am happy to say there is no interrogating this time around. In fact, he seems as pleased to see Quinton as Mom is.

My interest is piqued at my father's question, "Do you have plans for college, Quinton? You will be a senior next year, so it'd be better to think of options now."

My movements still. I keep my eyes on my plate, biting my lip. Quinton and I haven't talked about college. Why would we? It seems so far away. Truthfully, a year isn't as long as it sounds.

"I've received a few offers from different schools that I plan on looking further into over summer," Quinton replies, the sound of his voice enticing me to look at him. When I do, his eyes are fixated on me, as if he had been waiting for me to look his way. I swallow the lump that has formed in my throat before clearing it and going back to shoving food in my mouth.

"That's good to hear. College is quite the adventure, and you want to put some thought into it. Cora and I plan on having some long chats with Aron about it," Dad says, reaching over to grip my cheek between his fingers. I yelp at the unexpected touch then swat his hand away, causing him to laugh.

The rest of lunch goes by in a flash. Soon, Quinton and I are in my room. He is helping me to unpack my things and putting them where they belong, yet we're both quiet. The air becomes tense, like something is hovering over us waiting to pounce. I know what that something is but don't have the guts or the clues to bring it up.

It seems that I am in luck. Quinton opts to speak first. "Don't go freaking out about the idea of college."

I spin on my heels to face the boy that is placing a few of my school books into my desk.

He doesn't look back at me as he continues, "A lot can happen in a year. There is no point fretting over it when we haven't any real plans to consider."

Sighing, I wait until Quinton fully stands and stares back at me to say, "You're shit at comforting people."

“Who said I was comforting? I simply don’t want you going into one of your many frantic episodes.”

“Whatever, I wasn’t fretting. I’m curious though,” I hum, taking a seat on my bed. Quinton follows my lead, sitting beside me. I smile when he grabs my hand, interlocking our fingers.

“Curious about what?” he asks.

“We never talked about college. I assumed you’d go. Obviously, I have to go, but what do you even want to go for?”

I would be lying if I said a part of me was and still is panicking at the idea of graduating, heading for college with no idea whether Quinton and I would be capable of seeing one another. However, like he said, we have a year, a year to think about it, a year to discover what it is we wish to do. There’s no point worrying over it when neither of us is even sure where we’re going.

Quinton turns away. The action makes me nervous, even more so when he replies, “I once believed my only course of action was to work in crime, somewhere I can chase down killers like.” He grits his teeth. “Like my father. If I could save as many lives as he took, perhaps it would prove my worth.”

“But your dad has nothing to do with you,” I argue, only to have Quinton interrupt me with a kiss. He remains attached to my lips long enough to turn my brain to mush before pulling away.

“However,” he speaks with this kind of smirk that makes him appear so collected and confident that part of me wants to smack it off. Another, much larger part of me, is happy for him. “A certain someone has made it quite clear to me I am not my father nor am I accountable for his actions, so I

have changed my mind and decided upon majoring in Biomedical Sciences. I have always been a bit of a geek."

"A bit? I would argue you're the geekiest of them all." I tease around a smile that Quinton returns. I discover I prefer him with a smile, though I quite like knowing that he only shows it around me.

Quinton rolls his eyes. "What about you?"

"What about me?" My smile fell the moment he asked the question. "I don't have much of a say in it. Whatever makes me look best, I suppose. Probably Political Science or something to do with business."

"Why not go for something else?" Quinton asks. "What is it you want to do?"

"It doesn't matter. I can't do it. You know I can't." And it's beginning to piss me off, but whenever I look at him and see genuine curiosity in his expression, it makes me a bit sad. He knows as well as I that I haven't much of a say in what I am about to do with my life. Yes, I could probably go for something else, but it's not like I'd be able to do anything other than rule.

"Did I ever tell you I wanted to be a paleontologist when I was little?" I mumble.

Quinton shakes his head and nudges me as if to tell me to continue.

"I used to run around in the garden digging it up with spoons or whatever gardening tools I could find. I'd bury my toys in the dirt and leave them there for a few minutes before coming back to pretend I had dug up a fossil. It drove Mom nuts." I laugh, thinking back to how she would come find me covered in dirt and the occasional scratch from the twigs. She'd always wipe me off while grumbling about her ruined flower bed. Then let me go in order to continue my expeditions.

Continuing, I say, “I once found an arrowhead when we had gone on a trip to only God knows where. I was beyond excited. I still have it, actually.”

Thinking about this is depressing, so I jump up from the bed, much to Quinton’s surprise. His hand relinquishes its hold on my own. I force a smile that I know he can see right through. I’m proven correct when he says, “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” I play dumb.

“Smile when you don’t want to.” He stands and presses his knuckles against my forehead. The action makes my nose scrunch up. “The look doesn’t suit you.”

“Are you trying to say you like it better when I genuinely smile?” I tease. Now he actually puts force into his knuckles to push me back a step or two. I laugh and rub at the spot where his knuckles once were that only tingles.

“Dumb ass. You should talk with them.”

“Huh?” I’m confused. Did the subject change again somehow?

Quinton rolls his eyes. “Your parents. If I was ordered to speak with my mother this summer, then I think it is only fair that you speak to your parents.”

“About college? I don’t even know what to say. I have no idea what I want to do and it’d be stupid.”

“Come now, Aron, you’re quite good at spewing shit out of your wit.” Quinton taps the side of my head with his finger.

“Shut up,” I hiss, pushing his hand away.

However, as Quinton peers down at me with that same smirk only this time I feel it’s more directed towards me, like he’s trying to tell me to be as confident in myself as I am in him, it makes my stomach fill up with a warmth that I can’t describe. I think that maybe he’s right. Maybe it would

be all right to take a chance and speak with my parents about my future and what I wish to be in it.

I always back down, always assume there's no point in fighting because I am always expected to do what others wish of me to do, but there's no harm in trying. Quinton makes me feel like it will be ok to at least try.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Much like our spring break, time flew by.

Before I know it, it's already Wednesday and I'm preparing to head for the play with my parents and Quinton. Though I am excited about the play, having not seen one since my mother took me a few years ago, I am also a bit sad. Quinton leaves Friday afternoon, ending my week of freedom and beginning my nearly two months' worth of hell until school starts back up again... and I can see Quinton.

I'm finishing up with my tie when there's a knock on the door. I shout they can enter. Quinton steps in, shutting the door beyond him. I have to clench my teeth over my bottom lip to keep my jaw from hanging open. I've seen Quinton in a suit during the Valentine's Day dance, but I didn't think I appreciated the sight as much as I do now.

His hair is styled back, giving him a very mature look that suits him more than I'm willing to admit. This suit, unlike the one he wore for the dance, is

tailored, courtesy of my parents. The suit fits him perfectly, hugging his body to show off the excellent physique we all know he has. The jacket makes his shoulders broader and sturdy, or rather proves that they are as broad and sturdy as they appear. He looks polished, like a proper gentleman.

He smirks upon seeing my obvious check out. However, he says nothing because he knows as well as I that his eyes were scanning over me the same way.

“See something you like?” I ask, grinning.

“I could ask you the same thing.” He snorts, coming over to inspect my tie as if he thinks I didn’t do it right. Upon realizing that, yes, I tied it correctly; he drops his hands to hide them within his pockets. “Impressive.”

“I’ve been wearing suits longer than you can imagine.” I tug on his tie to tighten it enough that he has to readjust the garment in order to breathe.

“Ever so mature.” He scowls while fixing the tie.

“You realize my parents are going to make you keep that suit?”

“I’m returning it.”

“Momma Cora will throw a fit if you try,” I tease, thinking back to how excited Mom was just taking Quinton to get his suit tailored. She was as excited for him as she was with me. Of course I tagged along because it was hilarious watching someone poke and measure Quinton, who was beyond uncomfortable but said nothing or complained because my mother was there and paying for it. I made a mental note to bring Mom around him more often. She always gives me a good show!

Quinton inhales deeply through his nose before exhaling it all out through his mouth in a long sigh that has me laughing. He looks at a loss. In the end, grumbles about having to fit the suit in his suitcase.

A moment later, a maid arrives to inform us of our departure in a few minutes. Quinton and I head downstairs to the lobby to find my mother and father waiting. Dad is dressed the same as Quinton and I, decked out in a suit though his is navy blue, unlike our own that are black. He says black makes him feel old. I don't question him. Mom has on a light blue dress that flows around her feet, matching Dad's suit. She squeals upon seeing Quinton and I, runs over in order to inspect us both before happily deeming us both 'fine-looking young men' and 'future heart breakers.'

I snort, "Quinton, the future heart breaker, right."

Quinton elbows me. I snort a second time and follow my parents to the limo waiting outside. Quinton gets in first after my parents insist on it. When we get to the theater, there will be paparazzi and they hope if they got out first Quinton would get less attention. He isn't used to it like we are.

"Never been in a limo?" I ask, watching Quinton peer about the interior. He shakes his head. "I'm giving you all kinds of firsts."

I don't realize what I've said until after I say it. Quinton looks at me with these smokey eyes that have my palms sweating. With a smile that can only be described as pure evil, he replies in a soft voice that can hardly be heard over the sound of the car, "Indeed you have."

I clear my throat, scratch at the back of my burning neck, then start a conversation up with my parents. Damn him for making me blush with my parents around. He's lucky they are too busy fighting over if Dad can drink some wine now.

It doesn't take long to get to the theater. Just as we expected, the moment our limo pulls in, we see paparazzi outside. Their cameras flash sporadically before the door is even opened.

Quinton grimaces beside me. "You're such a pain."

“How am I a pain? They’re the ones snapping pictures like their lives depend on it!” Which I guess it does, but it’s a terrible way to make a living.

Mom and Dad step out first. Now the flashes are coming inside the vehicle. Though I’m used to the lights, Quinton isn’t. I end up having to tug at his hand to show him where the exit is because the light makes his eyes squint.

The both of us step out. Sadly, Quinton garners as much attention as we do. I hear reporters attempting to ask who he is, how we know him, whose family he belongs to, all while snapping one picture after the other. I press my hand to the small of his back, using the hold as a guide up the theater steps. I’m slightly surprised he doesn’t push my hand away. When we get into the theater, I see the way his eyes have watered. He blinks rapidly. The camera flashes really irritated him.

He gives me an incredulous look, like he’s shocked that I’m so ok. Laughing, I explain, “I’m used to it."

“They’re like vultures.” He rubs his eyes and wipes beneath them. I remember how I used to see dots for at least five minutes after seeing a camera flash so much. I imagine he’s going through the same.

“Just close your eyes for a bit. The flashes will go away,” I inform him, rubbing his back as I do. Again, he doesn’t push my hand away, and it makes my stomach warm.

Sadly, my hand is forced to drop from its position on his back upon seeing my mom face us and ask, “Are you alright, Quinton?”

“Fine,” he grunts, blinking his eyes once more.

“They are quite bothersome,” Dad says, sipping from a glass of wine that he must have gotten from a waiter. Mom glares at him from the corner of

her eye. He shrugs her off. “Next time, we’ll have to bring you a pair of sunglasses.”

Quinton rolls his eyes and looks at me with a smirk, “Who said anything about a next time?”

“Ouch.” Dad cackles and leads Mom to our V.I.P. box.

“Who said anything about a next time?” I mock in an incredibly high-pitched tone that sounds nothing like Quinton, which is probably why he slams his foot into my toes. I yelp and half walk, half hop in the same direction my parents went with Quinton beside me.

I sit between my mother and Quinton. Shortly after we arrive, the lights grow dim. Within the darkness, I reach for Quinton’s hand to realize he has done the same. I shoot him a look, as he does the same to me. His hand tightens around mine, making me smile. It’s too dark for Mom to notice. She’s too preoccupied with the beginning of the play.

We sit like this, our hands within one another. I can’t help but fixate on how good it feels. Here we are, sitting in a theater with hundreds of others, holding hands like any other couple does. It feels so right. It feels warm and welcomed and like the most normal and comforting thing I ever had in my life. I want this moment to drag on for an eternity. I want this to be our normal. I wish the play never ended.

But it does, and I enjoyed it. There were outstanding actors, wonderful voices, even some creepy scenes that Quinton teases me for jumping at. I don’t bother him with a response because I’m had fun and I think Quinton did too. The lights return. We all stand to clap. I immediately miss the feeling of Quinton’s hand in mine. We look towards one another and I get the distinct feeling he is having the same thoughts as me. Throughout the car ride home, all I can think about is how I wish for us to do such a thing

again. It’s the same thoughts that have been swimming within my head for ages.

I have been focusing so much on a single thing, like the desire for us to be open about our relationship, that I don’t have the time to consider anything else. Before I know it, our time together is nearing an end.

I woke up Friday morning thinking of nothing other than Quinton leaving this afternoon. I get out of bed to see that Quinton is already gone, most likely downstairs eating breakfast. Well, more like lunch since it is noon. I throw on some sweatpants and a t-shirt before making my way down to the dining room.

I expect some teasing from my parents or a taunt from Quinton upon opening the doors to the dining room. Instead, I hear Mom talking soothingly, “I’m so sorry, Quinton. We never would have imagined...”

“Imagined what?” I ask, slowly making my way to Quinton’s side, who holds his phone tightly.

Mom frowns. Dad taps his finger aggressively against the table. Quinton has his eyes narrowed on whatever he’s reading. He doesn’t look at me when handing over the phone, allowing me to snatch it from him and stare wide-eyed and insanely pissed off at the article he was reading.

Future King Befriends Son of Serial Killer. Beneath it is a picture of Quinton and I Wednesday evening.

If that kind of title doesn’t catch your attention, I don’t know what will.

Angrily, I scan over the article that spans across the homepage of every news site I can find. There are articles about Quinton’s father going over what he did, as well as things written about what happened between Quinton and I at school. There are accounts told by fellow students and I

can’t help but ask myself, how in the hell did they get it all out so fast? It hasn’t even been two days!

My eyes focus on certain words and phrases, particularly ones that fixate more on Quinton being the son of a murderer rather than a genius boy whose father happens to be a terrible man. People are questioning me and my judgment of character, as well as my parents. There are mentions of how childish I am to get into fistfights at school or how Thorton could be considered so prestigious when they let a boy like Quinton in.

A boy like Quinton.

Why the hell aren’t they saying anything good about him? I see nothing about how he got into Thorton on a scholarship or how he’s going to get a free ride into college because any college who isn’t willing to take him is crazy. He is the best in all our classes, always has been. He came from nothing. Unlike the rest of us, he got into Thorton’s based on merit rather than money. No one wants to mention that.

I search through article after article, trying to find mentions of anything other than how they think it’s a bad idea for the prince to interact with the son of a killer. I do not find what I’m looking for. Returning Quinton’s phone to him, I know that I have to release this anger in some way, so I grab a handful of napkins and tear them until it’s raining confetti.

“What the hell is that?” I hiss, facing my parents to find them watching my every move. “That is such bullshit! Dad!” I look at him like I once did as a child, hoping that he’d do something about it.

“I’m sorry, Aron. People may write their opinions. The papers are already out. I can’t do anything about it.” Dad sighs, looking at Quinton apologetically afterwards.

“You can at least call the news companies. Tell them to not even think about airing such garbage!”

“That would be basically telling them they do not have the right to speak. I’ve already requested that they respect Quinton’s privacy, but if they find these things out on their own.” He shrugs, throwing his arms into the air and allowing them to drop in aggravation.

I know the anger I feel towards Dad is wrong because I know he’s right, that he can’t really do anything about this. However, I still feel this rage that people would dare write about Quinton in such a way. That rage practically erupts like a violent volcano when I see the way Quinton is sitting rigid as a board, hands steady as they slice through his meal. He’s silent, eyes on his food rather than any of us, yet I can see a tremble in his jaw, like he’s using every ounce of control that he has to keep himself from reacting in a way he’d probably deem childish.

“Quinton,” I call. I don’t think he heard me. He continues eating as if I’m not calling his name a second, third, or fourth time. Finally, I take a seat at his side and grip his shoulder. This shocks him enough to drop his utensils and even knock over his drink, allowing it to spill across the table.

A butler rushes over to clean up the drink. I smile apologetically at them, then focus on Quinton. He won’t face me. I don’t care that my parents are here, watching as I grip the boys’ chin and force him to look my way. Though his face is apathetic, his eyes scream, *I’m hurting*. They’re shaking in a way I’ve never seen before, as if an earthquake is happening within them. There is so much I wish to say but nothing comes out as I gape like a fish in front of him.

“Aron, sweetie, why don’t the two of you spend some time together upstairs?” Mom suggests, making her way around the table to rub both

mine and Quinton’s back.

Quinton doesn’t say a word as I get up, grabbing his hand and using the hold to tug him along. He’s like a rag doll, simply allowing me to pull him at my own pace until we make it to my room. When we enter, the boy makes his way over to my bed. As he does that, I lock my door because something tells me I am going to cuddle with the bastard regardless of how much he claims to not want it. In our current situation, some physical forms of comfort are needed.

Quinton sits at the edge of the bed, grabs the remote and turns on the TV. The moment he does, the world makes things worse by allowing some dumb talk show to play. The both of us stare at the TV, listening to a few hosts make jokes about how the next horror movie will most likely be about Quinton or his father going on a killing spree in the royal household.

I storm over to Quinton, rip the remote from his hand, and shut the TV off just as their laughter echoes throughout my room. Silence follows. Now I can’t bring myself to look at Quinton. Not that he’s bothering to look my way, either. I wish to apologize, but I feel it isn’t enough or even capable of getting across what I’m feeling right now.

“They’re just,” I run my hands through my hair. “They’re a bunch of assholes. You know, TV is a bunch of garbage nowadays.”

Quinton nods, but his silence is unnerving. I want to make him feel better and all I can think about is holding him, so that’s what I do. I sit down next to him, throw my arms around him, and bury my face in the back of his neck. Quinton stiffens from the touch. He struggles for a moment, attempting to get out of my hold, but that hold only tightens until he finally relaxes. He reaches up to hold my hands beneath, rubbing the skin that

tingles at his touch. I don’t know how many times I repeat sorry, long enough for him to grow annoyed with me.

“Stop apologizing,” he orders, a long sigh following. “It’s not your fault.”

“It might as well be. If you were with someone else—”

“We both knew something like this would happen,” Quinton interjects, turning enough to face me so that he can wrap his arm around my waist. I place my chin on his shoulder and rub the other with my hand. “We just didn’t think it’d be so soon.”

“Don’t let any of it get to you. They know nothing about you.”

Quinton doesn’t reply, so I sit up straight and grip his cheeks. He narrows his eyes in a pathetic excuse of a glare, proving how bothered he is by this annoying scenario.

“Seriously,” I growl. “I know you, they don’t, and I know that you’re nothing like your father. You’re your own person and it doesn’t matter what everyone else says. I... I like you as you are.”

Quinton doesn’t hesitate to kiss me. His holds so tightly to my midsection that my sides almost ache. My hands trail from his cheeks to the back of his hair, where I intertwine my fingers into the short locks the best I can. We kiss for as long as our lungs allow us before pulling away just long enough to catch our breaths and for Quinton to whisper ever so quietly back, “I like you too, Aron.”

I’d smile uncontrollably for the rest of my life if not because Quinton eagerly leans back in to continue the exploration of my mouth with his tongue. I make a mental note to bake myself a cake or give myself an award for having remembered to lock the door earlier. We wouldn’t want anyone coming in to find us eagerly exploring each other’s bodies as if our very lives depended on memorizing every aspect of them.

We spend the rest of our time together practically glued to one another, sometimes at the mouth or the hips. Either way, it's a day spent mostly under the sheets and once in the shower to wash away as much evidence as we can. Sadly, my neck is littered with 'evidence' and I grumble later that evening about having to wear a turtleneck in the summer. Quinton simply smirks as he packs the last of his things while admiring his work from the corner of his eye.

"What part of do not leave marks' do you not get?" I ask the boy, who simply leans over in order to place a playful nip at a piece of my exposed neck. I curse and shove the quietly chuckling beast away.

"Like you didn't leave marks of your own," he says, pulling up the back of his shirt enough to reveal red marks up and down his back.

"You could have let me have your ass and the scratches wouldn't be there," I suggest, running my fingers up his spine. He shivers and now it's his turn to shove me away while I chuckle.

The teasing atmosphere dies the moment there's a knock on the door. A voice informs us that Quinton's car to take him to the airport has arrived. I shout back that we heard them and wince at how dejected my voice sounds. I glance at Quinton to see if he noticed. I'd say he did by the way he's staring back at me.

"How much will I get teased if I say," I bite my lip and nervously look away in order to work up some courage before locking eyes with him seconds later. "I'll miss you?"

I expect a smirk or a taunt, but I get neither of those. A moment of silence passes, one that has me anxiously nipping at my lip until it hurts. Finally, after about a minute but to me it felt like a year, Quinton leans over to kiss me, resting only to lean back in for another and another and some more,

enough that we have to be reminded a second time that Quinton's car is here.

Sighing, Quinton separates himself from me. My cheeks feel warm but they are on fire after Quinton says, "I'll miss you, too."

"Do you want me to walk you out?" I ask.

"It's probably best that you don't. I get the feeling you wouldn't be able to control yourself, Princess," he replies around a smirk that has me rolling my eyes.

"Like I'd be the only one unable to control themselves."

When he doesn't taunt me in return, I feel slightly embarrassed, mostly because the idea of Quinton feeling as saddened by our separation as me is mind-boggling. I like it though.

Quinton looks back at me from the doorway in order to say, "See you at school."

"See you." I wave until I can no longer hear his footsteps or the sound of his suitcase being dragged down the hall.

With a heavy sigh, I throw myself back onto my bed that, even after changing the sheets, contains a hint of Quinton's scent. I bury myself in it, curse and groan into the pillows and think that two months is far too long. This break is going to suck.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Suck it does. A week into my summer break without Quinton and I'm about ready to jump off my balcony. Every day is filled to the brim with talk of politics, shadowing my dad and everything he does. It doesn't look like much, seeing as most of the time he is in his office. However, there are mountains of paperwork, having to look over issues brought up by the people or new bills or laws that the council wishes to pass or may think will help with problems throughout the kingdom.

To be honest, I'm better at politics than anything else, considering my upbringing, that's to be expected. It doesn't mean I like it though. Sometimes I see something that could be changed, but in doing so, it will cause issues. For example, cutting out jobs or affecting our economy. Dad sure has a lot on his plate, having to decide the best course of action, as well as making everyone happy. No wonder his hair grayed at thirty. Shit, will mine do that too?

I run my hands through my hair that has always been a light blonde, so it's possible that I could gray early. I groan and slam my head against the desk, earning myself an arched brow from Dad. When I sit up, he smiles and says, "I know it's quite boring."

"That's not it. I was thinking about how I may get gray hair by the time I'm thirty, just like you."

Dad growls, "We promised not to talk about that."

I chuckle. "Sorry."

"Have you spoken with your mother about college yet?" Dad asks, a topic that I've been avoiding for the past week.

I squirm in my seat. "Not really."

"Why not?"

"Like you don't know." I sigh, tossing the documents aside that I had been reading earlier, but they've given me a headache.

Dad rests his work aside as well in order to lean back in his chair. It squeaks beneath his weight. "You've brought your grades up in such a short time. We've been getting countless letters from colleges."

"Of course you have, I'm the prince."

Even if I didn't bring my grades up, I suspect we'd still be getting letters. The schools don't care. They simply want the ability to say that the prince is going to their campus. Imagine the amount of students that will come pouring in afterwards. Their revenue will skyrocket.

Dad frowns. "Even if you weren't the prince, with the way you've been improving, we'd be getting letters, anyway."

"I guess. Whatever, I don't care where I go."

"Aron—"

“I’ll talk to mom. Don’t worry about it,” I interject, wishing to cut this conversation short. I rather not talk about school when I know, regardless of my own wishes, I will attend and go for whatever major suits everyone else’s wishes.

Dad’s frown deepens, though he drops the conversation, allowing our boring day to continue.

I’m beyond relieved to make it back to my room, where I flick on the TV and stupidly check the news. My glare intensifies, seeing that they’re continuing to discuss Quinton. Shouldn’t they be tired of this already? Nope, because there are suddenly all kinds of talk about his father; he’s a freaking celebrity now. I actually discovered there are people who wrote books about him. I shouldn’t find that unusual, seeing as many serial killers have people writing their life stories. Quinton’s father is all over the news. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen what he looks like.

Andrew James Barley, a.k.a. Quinton’s father stares back at me through the TV. It’s strange how I look back at the man who, honestly, Quinton resembles greatly. I once thought he resembled his mother, but now that I’ve seen his dad, I can’t deny their similarities. They have the same eyes, dark and seemingly emotionless, though Andrew’s are completely devoid of anything while Quinton’s always have a sort of sparkle even if I don’t always know what it’s from. Their facial structure is the same, strong jawline that could probably cut through glass and the same body type, tall with broad shoulders and muscular. However, Andrew carries more muscle than his son. I think I’ll avoid ever telling Quinton how he resembles his father. I get the feeling he wouldn’t like that very much.

The photograph soon changes into a video that was taken years ago of Andrew Barley answering questions in the courtroom or showing him being

escorted down the street by officers. Even his voice is deep and dark, enough to send a shiver down my spine. As I watch the way he moves or speaks to others, I quickly realize that while Quinton may be confident and sometimes a bit cocky, Andrew was straight up narcissistic. He was worse than I was back in the day!

Hearing so much about the man makes my stomach churn. I feel as if I'm defiling Quinton's privacy, which I am, seeing as all this is being brought up because of me. I let out a heavy sigh and quickly shut off the TV.

Moments later, I receive a text from Quinton claiming that he's home from his full-time summer job. The library needed more help this year. They asked Quinton to work more. I'm happy he's making the money, but annoyed that it's cutting into our time together.

I happily hop onto my computer, opening my video call to see that he's online and waiting for me as he said he would be in the text.

"Hi!" Autumn chirps the moment the video pops up.

I laugh at the strange gray hat she's wearing with large, floppy mouse ears. Quinton sits beside her with a face of disgust, probably because the girl is shoving her face full of popcorn.

"Hi, Autumn," I greet the girl, who smiles, showing off the kernels that are stuck between her teeth. "You got a little something." I run my finger over my teeth.

She throws her hand over her mouth. "Oh my god, Quinny, why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm not your mother," he hisses back, shoving the girl out of the video. She about his mean, scurrying away in the background to disappear out the door. I hear her shout something about proper food, then it's quiet.

"What is 'real food'?" I ask around a chuckle.

Quinton shrugs. “Who knows?”

“How’s work going?” I ask, knowing he mentioned he had never had a full-time job before. The library’s within walking distance and the work helps him keep his mind off things, so he says. I don’t see how. It’s a library. All he probably does is read and put books back on the shelves.

Wait, he probably loves it then. He’s a book worm after all.

“Fine,” he replies. “Autumn seems to think that it’s within her right to visit me regularly.”

“And by visit you mean bug the hell out of you.”

“That’s exactly what I mean.” He looks back at his bedroom door as if expecting her to come charging in. She doesn’t, so he returns his gaze to me.

Ah, speaking of girls!

“I heard from Raina that she passed her finals. She was lectured about her grades, but it seems she will be back at Thorton’s next year,” I announce.

Quinton grimaces the moment he hears the news. His voice oozes sarcasm. “Terrific.”

“Come on, she didn’t cheat off you in the end and, admit it, you should have told me from the start.” I point accusingly at him, even press my finger to the screen over his nose as if he’s actually here. He gives me a look that says he will do no such thing, and I roll my eyes. “Whatever, be stubborn.”

“Like you aren’t just as bad.”

I don’t bother that with a response. The two of us continue speaking; Autumn occasionally pops up to say a thing or two before Quinton gets angry at her. Once he even gets up and chases her out of his room. Sadly,

our chat is put to an end early after my father drags me out for some boring meeting that he wants me to sit in on.

Most of our time together is spent speaking over video chats. I feel better seeing Quinton and speaking rather than talking over the phone. Although seeing him on a computer screen does not stop me from missing the bastard. We don't speak as often as I wish we could. He's busy with work while I'm busy with my father. There are days when I get on to chat with Quinton, only to feel miserable because of how much my head is pounding from the work.

We're both busy. As much as I wish to speak with him, sometimes I get on to say hello only to realize I have little to say. We ask one another how our weeks went. Quinton tells me the same things he does at work while I talk of paperwork and politics that I did all day and wish desperately not to talk about. Our chats end. Before I realize it, our calls shorten, then lessen to one every few days.

However, a month into break, I feel as if I'm going through withdrawal. I'm so used to seeing Quinton regularly that it feels odd not to have him within touching distance. It's annoying. Not to mention the news. Even those who come over to the house for a visit are not helping. Basically, everyone I see brings up my friendship with Quinton as if it's such an oddity.

"You realize spending time with that Underwood boy isn't in your best interest, don't you, Aron?" Mr. Coralline asks one evening during dinner. Mrs. Coralline sits on his right with Willow on his left.

Willow has spoken little with me since our little talk in the cinema; however, she looks at me apologetically whenever her father said that. I

shake my head at her, hoping she gets I don’t blame her, then return my gaze to Mr. Coralline.

“What makes you say that?” I ask, voice low to hide the anger within me.

“Isn’t it obvious? With a past like his, it makes you seem like a poor judge of character.”

“Quinton is a good boy,” Mom cuts in. “He has visited us twice. He’s smart and charming. People just misunderstand him.”

“Exactly. His father’s actions do not define him.” I hiss at the man that has yet to take his eyes off me. “If anything, my being friends with him makes me an excellent judge of character. I can see him as the talented and intelligent guy that he is rather than the monster people make him out to be because of something his father did.”

“That may be true,” Mr. Coralline agrees, making me stare at him quizzically. The anger within me makes my throat run dry. I grab my glass to take a drink, but his words stop me from actually bringing the beverage to my lips. “But not everyone sees it that way. They will believe whatever the news tells them and the news is only speaking about the fact that he’s the son of a vicious rapist and murderer. You must realize, in our lives, our own thoughts don’t really matter because the public only sees what the public wishes to see and they see Quinton as a bad choice.”

My mother screams when the grip I have on my glass shatters it. The shards fly across the table. Some lodge themselves within my palm. However, the pain doesn’t stop my anger. If anything, the pain helps the rage build to where I explode. I jump out of the chair, forcing it to crash to the ground. I don’t even bother excusing myself; simply stomp out of the dining room with my parents shouting after me.

It isn’t until I reach my room that the pain gets to me. I rush to the bathroom to stare at my quivering hand with shards of glass sticking out of the palm. I hiss as I slowly pick the pieces out. It’s as I’m doing this that my mother arrives, hesitantly knocking on my bathroom door before peeking her head in to find me leaning over the sink.

“Sweetie,” she calls, entering with a few bandages and disinfectants. “Sit down.”

Nodding, I take a seat on the edge of the table. She kneels in front of me, resting her nursing kit on the floor. Using pliers, she picks the smaller pieces of glass out of my bleeding palm.

“What a mess you’ve made,” she teases, looking at the blood on the floor. “I remember when you were about six and you thought it’d be a good idea to play baseball in your room.”

I smirk at the memory. “I busted the window in my room. You have to admit it was a good swing, though.”

“Always the optimist.” She laughs, finishing up removing the glass. Now my palm is really stinging. Mom puts disinfectant on my hand, making me hiss. “You were covered in glass, even more so when you tried picking up the glass with your bare hands so I wouldn’t find out.”

“A boys gotta do what a boys gotta do to stay out of trouble.”

She rolls her eyes, then sighs. “Baby, I know what John said bothered you.”

John is Mr. Coralline, but I always felt weird calling him by his first name.

“But you can’t let talk like that get to you. People are constantly going to be judging you and every little decision you make. You need to stay strong.

You need to show that you have faith in yourself and by doing that, others will come to have faith in you," she finishes.

"That's easier said than done." I examine the bandage Mom has wrapped around my hand. I can't bring myself to look at her. I fear she may see something I'm not quite ready to tell her yet. "People keep saying bad things about Quinton without even learning anything about him. It pisses me off more that at one point I was just like that. They won't even give him a chance."

"But you're giving him a chance." Mom says, gripping my chin to force me to look at her. I blush at her smiling face. "And people will see that. It will take some time, but I'm sure you and Quinton will change everyone's mind. You're both quite stubborn."

I smirk. "Yeah, we are."

I expect mother to leave, perhaps order me to stay in my room and calm down or offer to have the rest of my dinner brought up. However, she does none of that. Instead, she sits before me, her eyes focused intensely. My face heats up under her scrutiny.

I avert my gaze, wondering why she's staring at me before I eventually cave in and ask, "Is there something on my face?"

"Oh!" She blinks. Now I'm wondering if she hadn't blinked at all in the last, like, five minutes. "No, no, I was just," she bites her lip as she brings her hand up to brush against them. "Sweetie, is there, uh, something you wish to tell me?"

"What?" I ask, my voice coming out hoarse. I clear my throat and ask a second time. "What?"

Whatever she's thinking must become quite clear to her because I swear a light bulb goes off above her head. Her jaw drops. She blinks rapidly. Now

her face matches my own, as red as a fire truck. She throws both hands over her lips as she abruptly stands and paces the room saying, “Oh, oh, oh!”

“What oh?” I ask, jumping up as abruptly as she did.

She pauses, looks at me with wide eyes and mouth agape before spinning on her heels. I frantically follow the woman that halts in her movements in the center of my room. She turns back to face me with pursed lips. She looks lost in thought.

“Mom, you’re acting weird,” I mumble nervously.

“Ok, yes, I know, sorry, baby.” She sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose before dropping her hands in order to place them on her hips. “As the Queen, I will say that your choice is a difficult one that will bring on more problems than you may be ready for. Life will not always play out the way you wish it to. People will question you more than they already do. It is not in your best interest and it will most certainly affect your future in ways we could never imagine.”

I’m not exactly sure what she’s getting at, but for some reason, it makes my throat run dry.

“However.” She approaches me to place her hands gently on my cheeks. Her thumbs caress the burning skin. Smiling, she speaks soothingly. “As your mother, I will say that I’ll love and support you and all your decisions.”

“My decisions?” I ask, my mind beginning to catch on to her meaning but wishing desperately for it to be a lie.

“Your decision to be with whoever you want to be.”

Now I know exactly what she’s talking about, so I desperately try to change her mind. “Oh, no, no, no! Quinton and I... we’re not...”

I try to think of an explanation, but her expression tells me that no matter what I say, she knows.

She knows.

It took some time, some subtle hints that I didn't mean to give, but Mom has discovered the truth. Guilt, fear, and panic rise within me to where I don't have a clue what to act on first. However, as I look down at her, I see nothing but pure love etched across her features. There's no hate, disgust, or disappointment. All I can see is acceptance, understanding, concern, and love, pure motherly love that I should have known she would give me.

Relief washes over me. The guilt, fear, and panic subside. I feel relieved, relieved enough for my eyes to brim with tears, relieved enough for me to embrace my mother who happily does the same to me, relieved enough to cry like some toddler into her shoulder while she runs her fingers through my hair as she often did when I was young. Relieved enough to let the feelings pour out through my tears that don't stop for a good ten minutes, not until my voice is hoarse, my eyes sore, and my mother's shoulder drenched.

I hiccup out an apology that she shushes in an instant.

"Don't apologize," she orders. "Never apologize for loving someone." She says nothing afterwards, doesn't ask, simply smiles and places a kiss on my forehead. "You're my baby boy, no matter what. I love you more than words can describe."

With that, she instructs me to get some rest. Before she leaves the room, she looks back at me to say, "Whenever you feel like talking about it, any of it, know that I'm always here, Aron."

I nod while desperately wiping away the evidence of tears. She smiles at me one last time before shutting the door behind her, leaving me with the

aftermath.

My stomach churns.. I feel like I’m going to be sick. My body drops onto my bed like dead weight to bury my face in the pillows. Obviously, only one more person has learned the truth, but feels different. It’s different because she’s my mother. Every child fears their parents discovering the truth. It doesn’t matter how kind your parents are. Every child thinks, *but it’ll be different for me*. There’s a fear of them being disappointed, and that fear is enough to drive one mad. Although deep within, I knew my mother would be accepting; I didn’t want to disappoint her. I didn’t want to be the blemish in her life. I wanted to be a son she could be proud of. I wanted her to happily announce to the world that I’m her son.

Knowing that she’ll love me even after I one day admit to the world that I’m in a relationship with another man is one of the most satisfying feelings in the world.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It's been a week since Quinton and I have done anything more than text one another. I practically teleport from Dad's side to my room. With little thought, I throw open my laptop and curse upon hearing it actually lift off the desk before falling back down. I frantically wave my arms about as if I expect the thing to shatter. Thankfully, it doesn't, and it settles peacefully back into place. With a relieved sigh, I log on and call Quinton, who answers almost immediately.

"That was quick," he says while leaning back in his computer chair.

"Hello to you too," I hum, resting my head on my raised fists. "I actually have something to talk about today."

"Oh?" Quinton arches a curious brow. "And what might that be?"

I bite my lip from nerves kicking in. Earlier, I could stave them off by thinking about work. However, now my stomach is in knots at the idea of telling Quinton that my mother is totally aware of our relationship. I wonder

if it will bother him, so I'm not surprised that after I sputter out my words that he has to ask, "What?"

I take a deep breath and try my best not to stutter this time. "How angry would you be if I told you my mother knows about us?"

I'm shocked I haven't bitten clean through my lip. Seeing him sitting there donning a blank expression makes me rub my hands together. I hide my face behind my hands, peek over them, then hide again until he asks, "Why would I be angry?"

I keep my face mostly hidden with my hands as I answer, "Well, we never discussed when to tell everyone and, like, it was an accident, but I thought it might bother you or something."

Quinton shakes his head. "You're such a dumbass."

"You know I could probably find the cure to cancer and you'd still call me a dumb ass."

"Obviously," he answers without hesitation, and that irks me a bit. Before I get time to bitch at him about the comment, he continues, "I doubt your mother will tell anyone. In fact, I'm half surprised she hasn't messaged me yet." He actually pulls out his phone to check for any missed calls or messages.

Laughing, I nod. "True. I guess she found out last night, so she may wait to see if I tell you. Once she knows you know, I'm sure you will get a plethora of messages."

Quinton hums, and I can't really tell if he sounds annoyed or pleased. Maybe a bit of both.

"How long do you suspect it will take others to find out?" I ask.

My mother discovered the truth accidentally through brief hints that were given to her by myself or Quinton. After all, she has seen us spend time

together, saw how I reacted when people spoke badly of him, so it isn't surprising she caught on. My dad may have his doubts, but he would never bring it up unless I did.

"Why are you asking?" Quinton inquires, narrowing his eyes to form a quizzical gaze. His shoulders grow stiff.

I shrug and rub sheepishly at the back of my neck. "I figured it would be better if I told everyone rather than let people presume, so just maybe when school starts we could…" I can't bring myself to finish.

However, before I have time to blush, mentally panic about the idea of our coming out, or even consider what to say when the time arrives, Quinton crushes it all by saying immediately, "No."

"H-Huh?"

"Are you crazy? If you haven't noticed, people are already questioning not only you but also your parents for simply being friends with me. Imagine what we will start by informing everyone that we aren't just friends." His words sting, but he makes a point. "Now is not the time."

"I guess, but it's not like there will ever be a best time."

"But there will be a better one. Listen, I have to go," he says, giving me no time to argue before logging out of the call. I groan and slam my head against the desk that rattles on impact.

That went well, didn't it!

I wish I could say our talk made me feel better, but in all honesty, I'm pretty sure it made me feel worse. Now isn't the time, there will be a better one, all that may be true, however, it doesn't leave me feeling relieved. Continuing our lies feels like a bad idea. If people are going to be bad-mouthing me, I want it to be about something that's actually true. Go ahead, tease me for being with a guy, tease me for making a 'bad choice,' I don't

care because at least I’m honest and isn’t honesty something everyone should want in a person, let alone a future king?

I grumble about good-for-nothing boyfriends and fall asleep with only unhappy thoughts that remain with me throughout the rest of break. I would say Quinton and I spoke more on the matter, but that would be an utter lie. Anytime I brought it up, he would either lecture me, ignore me, or cut our call off. Regardless of our bickering, I’m excited about the end of summer.

Unlike most people, I am beyond excited when break ends. My mother is a bit saddened by how ecstatic I am to leave. She insists that I’ll change my mind in a month or so. I doubt that, but choose not to argue. I’m giddy during the car ride to the airport, the plane ride, and the car ride from the airport to the school.

Quinton has already informed me he’ll be later than me since he takes a train. Apparently, it’s cheaper. Whatever, it gives me time to unpack.

I make it to my dorm to find Langley is already there unpacking his things. He happily greets me. We give each other a brief hug before Langley pulls away and says, “Not too long. I don’t want you to catch any feelings.”

I whack the back of his head. “Like I’d ever get feelings for you.”

“Not emotionally distant enough?” He teases, earning himself a second whack. “Two hits in the matter of thirty seconds. I think that’s a record!”

“I don’t think that’s something you should be proud of.” I laugh, shaking my head at the boy who helps me, seeing as he’s mostly done with his unpacking.

“I’m going to be straight up with you. I saw all the reports on Quinton over break,” Langley admits, making me drop the clothes I had in my arms.

“Really?” I try not to appear bothered by that fact when I really am. I pick up what I had dropped and continue my path to the closet.

“I’m sure everyone else on campus probably has to,” he says, obviously leading up to something. I’m proven correct when I turn to face him to find he has more to say. “You know not everyone will understand. People are probably going to mess with Quinton.”

“Like they didn’t before.” I was one of those people who messed with him.

“You know what I mean.” Langley sighs. “Before people just saw him as a jerk. Now they’re only going to see him as the son of a serial killer. If he wasn’t welcomed here before then he definitely isn’t now.”

I know that. I have known it since the moment I saw the news. I’m sure Quinton knows it as well. He has to because, hell, Langley knows it. My teeth grind as I try to remain calm. I take a deep breath and ask, “Are you ok with it?”

“With what?” Langley asks. “I mean, Quinton’s a nut, but he’s not his dad. Besides, I like having him around. Makes it more fun to tease you.” He lightly punches me in the stomach, making me grunt.

I roll my eyes. “I would have preferred if you simply said no.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

I grumble about how it has nothing to do with being fun, but continue my unpacking. Moments after I’m finished, I retrieve a text from Quinton saying that he’s arrived at his dorm.

“Leaving so soon?” Langley asks with a knowing expression that I growl at.

“I haven’t seen him in two months. Shut up!” I order, flipping the cackling hyena off before bolting out the door. He saw Ariel over break, so he does not know how I feel. Freaking worthless best friends not knowing when to keep their traps shut!

I say hello to all the students returning as I make my way to Quinton's. Some I know from other classes or having met them through my parents. I stop to speak with them a bit, asking how their summer went and all the niceties. Eventually, I make it to Quinton's dorm room that has changed since we are seniors now. It's strange being eighteen. That always felt like a world away, but now we're here.

Quinton is in the senior section of the dorms that I hear are actually bigger since some kids don't make it all the way to their senior year here at Thorton's. I knock on the door louder than I mean to. Blushing, I wait not so patiently for the door to be opened by Quinton. When he opens the door, he doesn't hesitate to drag me inside, seeing as students are already staring. I hear some whispering that I bet is about Quinton, which makes me roll my eyes. The boy locks the door behind us. As he does that, I peer around the room to see that it's a single bedroom.

I turn my head to Quinton, who asks, "What?"

"Don't you have to pay extra for a single bedroom?" I ask, looking around the room that's about the same size as last year, only this time it's a single. "How'd you get one? Did you get some extra money from your scholarship?"

"Not exactly," Quinton replies, brushing past me to continue his unpacking.

I frown at his obvious avoidance of the subject, which means...

"Does it have something to do with your dad?" I ask, walking over to help retrieve some clothes from his bag. I don't have a clue where he wants them to go. I grab them anyway. When I look up, Quinton's staring at me. His expression tells me enough. "They put you in a single room because of that?"

“No.” He heads for the wardrobes to hang up his school shirts. “Taylor’s family contacted the school and said they,” His shoulders stiffen. “They didn’t want their boy sharing a room with the son of a crazy killer. Apparently no one did, so I was given a single.”

He slams the wardrobe shut, making the both of us flinch. Something tells me he didn’t mean to shut it as hard as he did. He pushes his weight against the wardrobe, leans his head down and breathes out heavily through his nose. After a moment of this, he stands up straight again and says, “I suppose it is not such a bad thing. I prefer my privacy.”

He says that hoping I won’t see how bothered he is. I roll my eyes and say, “Don’t act like it doesn’t bother you.”

“I never said it didn’t,” he bites, turning to face me. His face is scrunched up in distaste. “But dwelling on it won’t change anything.”

“You’re allowed to be upset about it. You’re allowed to act upset,” I inform him, grabbing some of his books to place on the bookshelf. They’re about the only thing I know where to set them up, though I hope he doesn’t want them in a certain order because I haven’t a clue what that would be.

“How am I supposed to be acting, then?” He asks, crossing his arms. “Crying in the corner?”

“No. I don’t really know, just... if you want to talk about it or some shit,” I scratch shyly at the back of my neck. “I’m here or whatever.”

“Or whatever?” He breathes against the back of my neck, making me spin around to find him near. What is with him and sneaking up behind me? He’s a freaking ninja or something!

“Your way with words is truly fascinating,” he adds.

Five minutes into seeing each other, and the taunting already begins. Seriously, I wonder if we can go a day without taunting each other. Wait, I

know the answer to that. Hell no.

“I didn’t miss you at all, asshole,” I state only to prove that to be a total lie whenever Quinton leans in to remind me that yes, I definitely missed him.

The immediate moan that leaves me upon feeling him so close tells him that fact with no words. I curse my body for practically melting at his touch. Why can’t you cooperate with me? I get we haven’t done a thing with him for almost two months, but can you just not lose yourself the moment he is near? Freaking stupid hormonal body.

I would continue cursing myself for acting up with such ease, but Quinton is currently distracting me by moving us towards the bed. I laugh whenever we get a little too eager and he winds up stepping on my foot, nearly sending us toppling over. The little mess up breaks our kiss, allowing his mouth to begin its exploration of my neck. I’m still chuckling about the slip up though.

“Who knew you could get so eager about something?” I tease, earning myself a harsh bite that makes me curse. “Don’t bite me, you little shit!”

I jam my fingers into the side of his rib-cage, making him grunt. He pulls away to glare at the fingers that dare attempt to distract him from his plans, then looks up to me with an arched brow. His face tells me he thinks my actions were immature, but hey, he freaking bit me! How is that not considered immature?

“There is one good thing about a single bedroom,” Quinton hums when the back of my knees hit the mattress. The sudden jolt that I wasn’t expecting makes me drop to the bed. Quinton adds his weight to me in order to press me back. Now I’m flushing like a lunatic, not that I wasn’t starting to before.

“Yeah, what’s that?” I ask, although I’m actually pretty sure what the answer is.

“We won’t have to worry about any interruptions.” And he leans in to seal our fate for the day.

“I can totally see that limp.”

“Shut your stupid face,” I order Langley, who has to tease me the moment I get back to the room. The boy snickers and drops whatever he was reading. Wait. “You can read?”

“Ha!” Langley gives me the finger. “What a funny guy you are.”

“I have my moments.” I grab some shorts to sleep in and head for the bathroom, where I quickly change. I already showered at Quinton’s, so there’s no need for that. I make my way to my side of the room and curl up beneath the blankets. “Quinton has a single bedroom.”

“Oh.” Langley looks at me with a mischievous grin. “So that limp is going to become a permanent thing?”

“I’ll get him limping one of these days,” I grumble. I get that he’s a stubborn bastard, but come on, let me have a turn! Maybe he’s a bigger romantic than I thought and needs to be woo-ed? I laugh at the thought.

“Did Taylor not pass last year? I thought the kid was pretty smart?” Langley asks, frowning upon seeing my smile slip into a scowl.

“Why do you think?” I respond, my voice revealing more than I meant for it to.

Langley grimaces. “I told you, everyone probably saw it. How did Quinton take it?”

“Like you’d expect. Acts like it isn’t bothering him.”

“Some people handle things better by not letting things get to them.”

“But the fact is none of that should happen to him. He shouldn’t have to handle things like that. I mean, what’s the big deal?” I sit back up, unable to keep myself still. I kick my legs, causing the blankets to slide off them and onto the floor. “I don’t get it!”

“I don’t either, man. I’m sure this will pass. People will focus on something else and forget all about it but, for now, we just gotta,” Langley waves his arm around as if that will somehow help his thought process. “Get through this or something.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re so helpful.”

“I know.” Langley chirps before insisting we talk about something less depressing. He doesn’t get his wish because I end up deciding to get all the advice that I can from my best friend.

“Do you think telling the truth would help?” I ask, earning me a very shocked expression from Langley. Just in case he didn’t fully understand my question, I ask another, “Do you think coming out would help Quinton and I get through this or make things worse?”

Langley sputters out some words I don’t understand and now I totally get why Quinton teases me sometimes for it. Chuckling, I inform the boy I hadn’t heard a word, so he takes a deep breath, lets it all out in a long heavy sigh before replying in a very unsure tone, “I don’t really know. It could be either. Society has this weird fascination with serial killers, so they’re circling around it while parents and students are scared because they assume that violence is something you inherit.” He taps at his legs as he takes another moment to think. “There’s no right or wrong answer to that, Aron. If you feel now is the best time to come out, then do it.”

“Quinton only talked about it once with me. He said now wasn’t the best time.” I sigh, running my hand over my face as I recall all the other times

I've tried to discuss our closeting ways.

Langley shrugs. "I don't blame him. He's got a lot of focus on him and I doubt he wants more, but it's always easier to go through tough times when someone's beside you, so being able to be all disgustingly lovey in public with each other may help."

"Disgustingly lovey?" I snort, showing Langley through my expression that Quinton would never allow such a thing even after we come out. Quinton? Lovey? In public? That will be the day. Hell will freeze over before such a thing happens.

Langley laughs loudly as if he finally realizes what he said. "Yeah, like Q would be lovey." He shakes his head. "Seriously though, let Quinton know if you're ready. If he is too, go for it."

I nod, nod some more and some more until I grow dizzy enough that I have to stop myself.

He's right. If I'm ready, if Quinton's ready, then now is the best time. There's no guarantee that things will go well, there never will be a guarantee. Maybe Quinton's right and now would be a bad idea, but I honestly feel like if we told the truth, got everything off our chests, everything will go a lot smoother. No matter when or how we come out, the media will blow it way out of proportion, as it always does. Fretting about it, sitting around and mulling over when the right time will be is futile because there will never be a right time or even the best time.

It has to do with us and our feelings. If we feel it's the best time because it will help us, then it's the right time. I don't even think I made any sense, but that's how I feel. It won't be easy. It won't be fun, but it'll be the truth and isn't that what matters most?

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Langley's words, *we gotta get through this*, ring within my ears the next day when I am affronted first thing in the morning by the sight of a group of fellow students huddled around Quinton in first period. My mind doesn't have the time to process that Quinton and I are sharing a class because I'm too busy stomping over to break my way through the crowd. Upon realizing that it's me, the students part like the Red Sea.

"What's going on?" I ask, eyeing everyone who even hints at being displeased with Quinton, which is most of them.

Trenton, a boy I recognize from sharing classes, speaks first, "We've seen it all on the news. You have to be angry about it too! That freak hid his past from you."

"No, he didn't," I interrupt, scowling.

Quinton gently presses his hand to the small of my back. A silent gesture to tell me there's no need for this. I must disagree. About the only way

Quinton won’t be messed with is if I’m around or Quinton kicks the crap out of them. I rather he not get into fights because of me... anymore.

“I knew about his father for some time. Honestly, I’m confused why so many of you care so much about it,” I state.

“Why wouldn’t we?” another boy asks. The moment my eyes land on him, he shields himself behind one of his friends, scratching at his scalp as if he had said nothing. I remove my gaze from him to focus on Trenton, who seems to be the leader since he is the only one looking me in the eye.

“We’ve been in school this whole time with this freak. His dad raped and murdered people. Who's to say the same fucked up thoughts aren’t running through his head too?” Trenton points accusingly at Quinton.

What makes this worse is how Quinton isn’t arguing with anything Trenton has to say. Looking back at Quinton, I give him a concerned look mixed with confusion. He won’t look me in the eye. For once, he stares at the ground. Quinton, the one thing he is least confident about, is his father and that is the only thing he never argues about.

I whip my head back around to face Trenton. With a scowl, I shout, “A person is not defined by their parents’ actions. No one is all good or all bad because it’s our own actions that define who we are!”

Trenton grimaces at my words, as do some others. I look about the room at everyone who has their eyes on us. Some cower away from Quinton like he’s mad, while others are defensive. However, these are all people who have known Quinton all these years. Why is it they turned on him so easily? I get Quinton has always been quiet and never really associated with people, but certainly their minds cannot be so easily swayed.

As I think it over, something hits me that has me pulling my gaze back to Trenton. The boy takes a step back when I point accusingly at him and say,

“I think the real reason you’re all messing with Quinton now is because you could never do so before. He’s the best in our school and none of you could take him on. Now that you found a chink in his armor, you’re going to gnaw at it like rabid animals because you know you’d never be able to take him on without cheating!”

The room stills as my words sink in. I feel even more correct of my assumption when half the group retreats to their seats while others try to defend themselves with stuttering out ‘no,’ and ‘you’re wrong,’ but I’m not. It’s the truth. They’re messing with Quinton because now is the best and probably only time to do it.

I cross my arms and wait for some type of retort from Trenton. His eyes narrow. I think I’ve won whenever I see him turn to walk away. However, he halts for a moment before looking back at me from over his shoulder in order to say, “Seems the news is right.”

“About what?” I ask.

“You can’t even admit to your own mistake. I bet you’d let a creep like that into the court. We’re screwed with you as our future king.” With that, Trenton stomps back to his desk, leaving me fuming.

My own mistake? Is he trying to say my befriending Quinton to be a mistake? If making friends is a mistake, then I will continue to make mistakes for the rest of my life!

Once the room settles, I spin around to face Quinton, only to find that he has taken a seat already. He has his notebook out, ready to take notes on the first day, like the nerd that he is. He refuses to look at me, even when I sit next to him and ask, “What the hell was that about?”

Quinton taps his pencil against the desk.

“You didn’t even say anything back to them.” I lean over to knock his shoulder with mine.

“There was nothing to say,” he says.

“There was a lot to say, Quinton, like how you are nothing like your father. I’m sorry, I know it’s my fault that everyone knows now—

“Don’t do that,” Quinton groans, throwing his head back. He brings his hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Just don’t.”

“Don’t do what? Admit to the fact that anyone seen with me will have their past violated and revealed to the world?” Which is exactly what happened to Quinton. I guess I didn’t expect the reaction to be so big. I imagined he’d get his fifteen minutes of fame before everything would die down, but apparently people loved Quinton, or rather his father.

Quinton snaps his pencil, dragging both our attention to the now broken object. Half of the piece rolls off the desk and onto the floor. I imagine our conversation would have continued if not for our teacher walking in at that moment.

Quinton reaches into his bag for another pencil and simply hisses at me, “Drop it.”

Drop it for now.

After class, the air is tense. I try to lighten it by requesting to look at his schedule. We look over each other’s schedules to discover we share 3 classes and lunch this year, unlike last year, where we rarely crossed paths. Quinton mentions something about this year being hell, to which I agree because we both know I will do everything I can to piss him off with the time given to me. Since we do not share our next class, we part without dissolving the tension between us.

I never brought up discussing whether now would be a good time to reveal that Quinton and I are dating. I kind of already have my answer. He is far too stressed and annoyed to discuss it with me. I knew he'd probably stomp off or ignore me, so we will speak about it another time. I know we have to talk at some point. Once this all dies down, I would like to admit to everyone that we're dating.

"How was your class?" Ariel sings upon seeing me.

Langley is at her side with a taunting smile I roll my eyes at. The only reason Ariel knows I shared a class with Quinton is because Langley saw the boy enter the classroom moments before I did.

"Like Langley said, everyone saw the news," I answer, sinking into the seat beside Ariel.

The girl frowns and asks, "Were people saying anything about him?"

I'm guessing from her question that she is not worried about Quinton's past. That's a plus. I knew I liked her for a reason.

I nod. "More than that, they surrounded him like a pack of hyenas."

I left out the part that he wasn't even defending himself.

Ariel continues frowning while Langley tries to cheer me up by saying, "This is just some dumb fad. It'll pass like everything else."

It isn't a dumb fad, though. The peace we seemed to have last year has not followed us to this one.

It's been two weeks since the start of school and Quinton can hardly make it to class without being stopped by those who want to tease or question him. Quinton can handle himself. We all know it, we've all seen it, but that doesn't stop people from taunting him regularly and...

"Fuck off, Aron!"

It's taking its toll.

I narrow my eyes on Quinton, who, for once, is the one bringing attention to us. We're in public, yet he allowed himself to actually shout at me, practically bringing all eyes to us and it was over something fairly stupid. I simply asked if anyone had messed with him since our last class together, and that was all it took for him to raise his voice.

I try my best to speak rather than hiss at him. "It was just a question."

"It was a dumb question," Quinton grumbles, rubbing at his temple that I imagine is throbbing with a headache that he has probably had since the first day of class. Quinton likes silence. He likes peace. He likes being alone. He is getting none of those things now.

It's been a rough ride since school began. Last year Quinton and I spent every day with each other after class while this year I've been to his dorm maybe four times? Kissing hasn't happened in nearly a week, let alone anything else. Any time I try to talk about anything, like how this will all go away or we need to talk about it to make things better, he storms off. It's impossible to do anything!

I still haven't brought up the discussion of coming out. The idea makes me sick, especially with everyone's reactions, as they are now. I can't imagine Quinton would ever agree to the idea. He's so pissed off already that I'm sure the attention he would get after such a thing would only make things worse.

Sometimes Quinton is his normal self, teasing me like the cocky bastard that he is, while other times he just snaps. At times like this, when he is looking at me with an expression that can only be described as blank, I wonder what is going through his head. Is he mad? Upset? Confused? Lost? I try to search him for signs of emotion, but there's nothing. He's completely blank.

He opens his mouth to speak. Part of me is excited that he wants to start a conversation. Then he snaps it shut. I frown, bite my lip, and wait patiently for him to say something. He never does. Instead, he lets out a heavy sigh and heads to his dorm without asking for me to follow or if I want to go.

“Quinton, come on!” I groan, running after the stubborn asshole. “I’m sorry! I kn—”

“Don’t apologize,” Quinton hisses, pivoting on his heel to glare at me in a way that tells me more than his words ever could. “Stop fucking apologizing,” he demands.

“What do you want me to say?” I ask. Now it’s my turn to be looking in every direction because Quinton’s causing a scene and not me. Hold the phone, something is up because we have switched places and I’m not ok with it. “Lets... lets go to your dorm and talk, ok?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Leave me alone for the night.”

“Like I haven’t been doing that for, like, the whole week,” I hiss, my voice hardly above a whisper since some students can’t seem to keep their curiosity to themselves.

Quinton rolls his eyes. “Leave me alone, Aron.”

“Leaving you alone isn’t going to fix anything.”

“Nothing needs fixed.”

“Bullshit! I don’t know what you want me to do here!”

“I want you to leave me alone!” Quinton’s voice actually cracks from raising his voice so much in such little time. It leaves me shocked as I stare wide-eyed at how he actually seems genuinely angry with a flushed face and steam basically bellowing out of his ears.

My shoulders slump at seeing him in such a way. I’ve wanted to see sides of him that others haven’t, but not this one. I don’t like it at all, especially

since it’s directed at me. I know I’ve annoyed him before, but this is different.

“We don’t need to talk or anything just, let’s hang out. You-you can study and I’ll read if I have to,” I kick at the dirt beneath my feet. “I don’t want you to be alone.”

Quinton runs both hands through his hair, ruffling it roughly until dropping his hands like dead weight to his sides. He takes a deep breath before saying, “I’m going to my room... alone.”

With that, he leaves. I watch as he disappears down the sidewalk toward his dorm.

I scratch at my scalp like that will help the raging thoughts within my skull either come to a halt or decipher some answers. When it does neither, I curse loudly a couple times before stomping to my dorm where I focus my rage on video games, hoping to make myself feel better. It works until the next day.

I text Quinton good morning to receive nothing in return. Not that I expected a response. He hasn’t really been texting me either.

I release a heavy sigh as I leave Langley in order to go to first period. I’m trying to think of something to talk with Quinton about that won’t piss him off. If he needs time, then I’ll give him that. I just want us to talk like we normally do and joke around like we normally do and... I want what we normally do, even if that means pretending to forget about what’s going on right now.

I’m passing the boys’ restroom when I hear a familiar voice say, “You should have brought more to make this an even fight.”

I bolt into the restroom to find not only Quinton but also about five other students crowded around him. They have him locked in a corner, though he

doesn’t look concerned. I bet he isn’t either, because I know he could get himself out of this with that colossal head of his. However, getting out would require a fight and I can’t let that happen.

The fights between Quinton and me as sophomores slid because he was fighting me. Dean Coyler wouldn’t want my father discovering that I had been harmed. That would ruin the school’s reputation. However, if Quinton were to get into a huge fight with someone else, especially now after all the news, there’s no doubt that he’d either get expelled or in a lot of trouble.

I can’t allow his future to be ruined because of me.

All eyes turn to me when I say, “You all better get to class or you’ll be late.”

I’m sure if I were anyone else, the jerks would have completely ignored me, maybe even drag me into the fight and kick the shit out of me. However, I’m still the prince even if half the school thinks I’m a pathetic excuse of one. The guys grumble obscenities, snort, look back at Quinton before brushing past me, knocking shoulders with me each time. Once gone, I focus my gaze on Quinton, who is glaring at me.

“What’s with the glare?” I ask, ignoring the bell informing me he and I are late for class.

“I didn’t need your help.” He lifts his bag from the ground to sling over his shoulder.

I keep myself between him and the exit. If I move I know he’ll bolt out of here and I rather that not happen.

“I know. You would have to fight them, but you got away with fighting with me before because it was me. If you fought those guys, you would have gotten into a lot of trouble!”

Quinton rolls his eyes. “I would have handled it.”

“Without a fight?” I ask, mimicking him by rolling my own eyes. “I... I didn’t interrupt because I thought you couldn’t handle yourself.”

“Sure as hell seemed like you did. I’m not a helpless child.”

“I never said you were. Why are you being so defensive about this? Am I not allowed to help my boyfriend? Is it a fucking sin to want to protect you? Why are you being so...so,” I flail my arms in his direction. “So pissy about everything?!”

When Quinton walks towards me, I tense up, half ready to do whatever it takes to keep him with me and get something out of him. However, he doesn’t shove me out of the way or make a move for the exit. Instead, he throws an arm around my shoulders in order to bring me against him. He buries my face into his shoulder, and it isn’t until I feel something damp beneath me I realize my frustration has built up enough to make my eyes water. My nose runs. I sniffle and the sound makes Quinton finally say, “Stop that.”

“Stop what?” I play dumb.

“The water works,” he replies. I’m pleased he said that rather than crying. I’m not even sure if this counts as crying. I’m not sad. I’m frustrated and angry. It’s more like the anger has built up so much that the only way I can get it out is through shaking.

“Stop acting like a fucking asshole and I will,” I grumble angrily into his shoulder. I punch said shoulder, making him grunt in response. He runs his hand up and down my back soothingly. It reminds me of the time he rubbed my back after Gabby.

The memory makes me chuckle, and he asks, “What?”

“Just remembering the time you rubbed my back while I was vomiting and how hesitant you were. Now it seems you are ok with the idea of

comforting.”

His touch now is nothing like the one he gave me before. Before he didn’t even know what to do, while now he seems to have an idea.

“I suppose so.” He shrugs and doesn’t make a move to pull away. I wrap my arms around his waist, relishing in the physical contact I haven’t gotten from him in what feels like an eternity.

Sadly, Quinton pulls away before I’ve gotten my fill. I bite my lip to hold back a pout, but the pouting I would have done disappears when I see that same blank expression on his face. Once again, he looks about ready to say something, something important, but he snaps his mouth shut again, shakes his head, then says, “We need to get to class.”

“Ok.”

I want to talk, to fix this tension between us, but I don’t. I follow him silently, trying to think of a way to help this situation we’ve gotten stuck in. I can’t think of anything because all my ideas involve talking, which Quinton clearly doesn’t want to do.

The day goes by quicker than I expect it to. Actually, I’m shocked to hear the bell at the end of the day. The last two weeks have seemed to drag on for an eternity, however, today went by so fast. Before I have time to text Quinton and request we meet up, I receive a text from him saying that he’s leaving campus for the evening. I growl, knowing that the reason he left was to escape a talk with me.

That jerk! He isn’t helping the situation by avoiding me. I get that he’s stressed and shit has been, well, shitty lately but why does he have to act like such a... ugh!

I practically make Ariel piss herself when I slam the door of my dorm room shut upon entering. She and Langley know that I have been coming

here after class since Quinton and I haven't been hanging out much, though that doesn't make her any less surprised to see me.

"Aron, are you ok?" Ariel asks, realizing immediately that something is wrong. Of course she does. I don't normally scare the crap out of my friends unless it is for comedy purposes. This certainly isn't one of those times.

"Yes...no...I don't know!" I groan, throwing my arms into the air before punching my mattress.

Langley and Ariel watch on in concern as I punch and punch and punch at my bed to let out all the frustration and anger that's within me until Langley finally has to shout, "Aron!"

I whip my head in his direction to find the both of them looking at me apologetically. Sighing, I drop onto my mattress, burying myself into my pillow. My voice is muffled when I say, "Quinton's an asshole."

"That he is, but why is he an asshole this time?" Langley asks.

"He left campus because he knows I can't follow him."

"Ouch."

I sit up and spin around to face the two of them. Ariel bites her lip while Langley does his best not to look too worried. He's failing.

"I don't know what's wrong. I know Quinton is stressed, but when I try talking about it he ignores me or snaps. We can't have a normal conversation with each other no matter how hard I try. What am I meant to do?" I groan, looking between the two of them for an answer.

"I'm sorry, Aron. I don't know what to say other than do your best to be there for him." Ariel suggests with a shy shrug. "He's getting all this negative attention and most likely doesn't know what to do about it or it's bringing up bad memories. It's understandable that he's stressed."

“I know, I know.” I rub my shaking arms. “But I feel like he’s mad at me, like he feels it’s my fault, not to say that it isn’t because it is—”

“Don’t say that,” Langley interrupts, shaking his hands. “It isn’t your fault any of this happened. The news blew it all out of proportion on their own. It has nothing to do with you, Aron. Quinton knows that.”

“Just because he knows that doesn’t mean that he isn’t angry with me.” It’s like how your mind understands why someone has to be away for work, but your heart remains angry with them. I get the feeling that’s what Quinton is going through. “I try to apologize, but he gets angrier. I don’t know what to do...”

“It will be ok,” Ariel insists, nodding her head hopefully. She looks to Langley for backup, who nods just as enthusiastically.

“Yeah, Aron, seriously, things will be ok. Quinton is a tough guy. You messed with him, and that didn’t stop him. He’ll handle this in time. Just believe in him!” Langley gives me two thumbs up while giving me a cheesy grin that makes my lips twitch into a half smile.

“I do believe in him. I just want to help a bit.” Because that’s what boyfriends are meant to do for each other. I want to help him. I want to be there for him because I know he’d do that for me. I want him to rely on me some, but it seems no matter how hard I try, I only make things worse.

Maybe the news is right. Everyone’s screwed with me as the future king. I can’t even help my boyfriend, let alone the country.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Saturday passes by with hardly a word from Quinton. I got a few messages here or there where he claimed he was hanging out with Autumn. I was ok with that because it meant I could talk to her and possibly get some information. Sunday comes around and I call the girl who answers with a chirpy, “Hello, Aron! To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Tell me you have some clue what has crawled its way up Quinton’s ass and died,” I groan into the receiver, slinking to the floor like dead weight.

“What do you mean?” Autumn asks. “I haven’t done much more than text the asshole since summer ended. Is something wrong?”

“He said he was hanging out with you yesterday,” I mumble, pushing myself up to sit straight.

Why would he lie? What was he doing yesterday? If he didn’t want to see my face then he should have told me. He had no problem telling me the other day to leave him alone!

“I didn’t see him yesterday,” Autumn hums. “What’s going on, Aron? Are you guys fighting or something?”

No. At least I don’t think we are. I left Quinton alone yesterday because I thought it would be a good idea to do so. He said he was hanging out with Autumn and he asked that I leave him be so I did that. I planned on leaving him alone today too. It isn’t because I’m mad at him. I simply felt that with how stressed he’s been that maybe he really needs a weekend to himself. I wanted to give him that so I did but now I’m getting worried. Ok, so I was worried before but whatever.

“I’m thinking we might be now,” I grunt, running my hand through my hair as I try to think why he would lie to me.

“About what? Quinton has mentioned no trouble. I guess I haven’t been able to talk much with him since I was voted class president. My social life is basically nonexistent now.”

“Congratulations,” I laugh.

“Oh, don’t congratulate me when you’re depressed. Come now, let us have a therapy session. What has my best friend done?” Autumn asks, sounding like a mother who is about ready to scold her child. Knowing her, she would totally have the guts to scold Quinton and he’d probably listen too! I don’t blame him. If Autumn scolded me, I would listen.

“I can’t really say he’s done anything,” I reply, getting up from the floor to pace my room. “Everyone at school saw the news, so for the last two weeks, he’s been really snippy with me. When I try to talk to him about it, he avoids the conversation or gets angrier.”

Autumn hums. “I don’t really get why. He didn’t seem bothered over the summer about people knowing. Are you sure that’s what’s bothering him?”

“I don’t know what else it could be.” I shrug my shoulders as if she can see me. “Do you think there could be something else wrong? If there is, we’re so fucked because I can hardly handle what’s happening now!”

“Calm down, calm down. I’m not saying that there is, but I’m not saying that there isn’t.”

Real helpful, Autumn, thanks.

“You aren’t going to like this, but I think you should give him his space today. Quinton likes solitude and sometimes that’s what he needs to cool down. Talk to him tomorrow about something other than what’s been going on and if he’s still snippy, then maybe there is something else on his mind,” she says.

“I planned on giving him the day, anyway. Thanks, Autumn.”

“Hey, listen, don’t let this speed bump bother you. Quinton adores you. I’m not kidding. He told his mom about you!”

Wait...what?

“He talked to his mom about me?” I ask, my cheeks becoming warm. He never mentioned that they talked this summer. I made him promise he would talk to her, but I never asked about it. I figured he’d tell me, eventually. Plus, with everything going on, talking has been at a minimum and pretty difficult, so we haven’t talked about much of anything.

I can envision Autumn nodding on the other line as she answers, “Yeah! You told him to talk to her over the summer, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, he did, didn’t he tell you? They aren’t all buddy-buddy, but he wasn’t miserable. He even told her he had a boyfriend. Of course, he didn’t say you were the prince, but she probably got the gist of it after the news. Come on, that’s pretty cute isn’t it?” Autumn giggles and I really am

grateful for having her in my life. She's making me feel better by revealing secrets that Quinton would probably keep to himself in order to save himself some teasing from me.

Laughing, I nod and reply, "I guess it is. Thanks for telling me that."

"Oh, you know I'll tell you anything that can possibly annoy Quinny!"

Yes, I definitely know that.

Autumn and I talk a little longer about random things before hanging up. I felt a bit better after speaking with her, but the closer Monday gets, the more worried and concerned I become until Monday finally rolls around and I haven't a clue what to say to Quinton.

However, my cluelessness, which shall become a word for this moment to describe my lack of clues, dissolves the moment I see Quinton sitting at his desk with a black and blue eye.

I bolt over to him at the speed of light. He holds his hand up the moment he sees me and says, "Don't."

"Don't what?" I hiss, taking a seat next to him while leaning over to inspect the damage. All I can see is a black eye, but that doesn't mean it's his only injury. "Ask about it? How in the hell can I not ask about why you have a black eye?"

Quinton rolls his eyes. "I got into a fight over the weekend. That's all."

"Oh? Was it on Saturday when you were supposedly with Autumn?" I ask, narrowing my eyes to show that I'm aware he lied to me. He scowls but says nothing, and that pisses me off. "So you lied to me and got into a fight on that day? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you'd do this," he grunts, gesturing to me with a wave of his hand.

“Wouldn’t most people be concerned?” I ask, debating on grabbing the boy and skipping the rest of the day in order to talk. I doubt he would let me so easily, though. We haven’t fought in a while, so it would be interesting to see if I could somehow knock him out and lock him away in my room. Wait, that sounds like kidnapping and I shouldn’t think about that.

Quinton shrugs. “Drop it, Aron.”

“You’re making me drop everything. What is up with you? I can’t help if you don’t tell me what’s wrong. God, this is like Raina all over again,” I grumble, throwing my head into my hands as I realize that we’ve had a conversation identical to this one before. Yet again Quinton is hiding the truth from me, trying to fix things on his own. Haven’t we learned our lesson from the last time he tried that?

“This isn’t anything like Raina.” Quinton sighs prior to our teacher entering the room. I’m sure we’d continue arguing if not for that. It is put on hold for now, though throughout class I am doing everything but paying attention.

Quinton, on the other hand, seems enraptured by class, putting all his focus on our teacher, and that pisses me off. How can he so easily ignore our issues? Does he not even care? I’m about ready to ask him that at the end of class when a few fellow students pass by, words like ‘freak’ and ‘how can Aron stand being around him’ pass their lips.

Quinton tenses, but says nothing while I jump out of my seat and shout after them, “What did you just say?”

The two girls who had said it stop and turn to me with wide, fearful eyes. I glare death at them and repeat myself, “What the fuck did you just say?”

I step around the desk to approach them. Neither of the girls seem to like that, but they shouldn’t have freaking said something so rude if they didn’t

want to be taught a lesson.

“N-Nothing,” one squeaks, stepping closer to her friend.

“Your Highness, is something wrong?” Our teacher, Mrs. Barrett, asks, interjecting herself between the girls and me.

“Yes, there is!” I hiss, pointing accusingly at the girls. However, Quinton grips my wrist and forces it down.

“No, everything is fine,” he states, tugging on my arm as he does. “Aron misheard, right?”

The girls nod to save their own asses. I heard nothing wrong, though. Quinton is only saying that because he doesn’t want me to make a scene. Too late for that, so I might as well make sure that everyone is aware of what will happen if they keep this up. I am going to call every single person out because I’m so fucking tired of this!

“Like hell I did!” I rip my arm from his grasp. “How can I stand being around him? That’s what you asked! You called him a freak, but the only freaks I see here are you two, the assholes who can’t keep their noses out of other people’s business!”

“Mr. Vaughn,” Mrs. Barrett gasps, looking at the girls, who grumble to themselves, probably more insults, though they’re most likely directed at me now rather than Quinton.

“What?” I ask, throwing my arms up defensively. “That’s what they are! I’m simply stating a fact.”

“Aron,” Quinton groans. “Let’s go.”

“Not until they apologize!” I look at the girls. “Apologize to him.”

The girls don’t hesitate to say in unison, “Sorry.”

It was a pathetic excuse of an apology that they clearly only said in order to get away, but I accept the apology, nonetheless. Mrs. Barrett attempts to

pull me aside to talk, but I'm stomping out of the classroom before she gets a chance. Surprisingly, Quinton follows, even grabs me to force me to stop and take a breath.

"Calm down," he orders, holding my hand for a literal second before dropping it.

"I am calm. I am totally calm. This is my calm!" Because shouting proves how calm one is.

Quinton gives me a disbelieving look before saying, "You're really not."

"Oh, like you are," I grumble, crossing my arms defensively as I glare at the ground as if it's the thing that's making me angry.

"Are you free after class today?" Quinton asks, successfully stopping my glare and turning it into a questioning look.

"Yeah, aren't I always?" I attempt to joke, hoping to get a smirk or a chuckle from him and myself. Thankfully, I get both from him and that eases me enough to let out a sigh.

"Come over?" He actually asks, making me smile like some giddy idiot.

"Sure, ok." I nod, unsure why he is asking or why I'm so happy about it. Ok, so I'm happy because we haven't really been spending time together outside of class. He's most likely asking because we've kind of, sort of, been in an argument or misunderstanding or whatever the hell one wishes to call what's going on between us. The point is that I'm happy he asked and happy to be going over.

With that, Quinton says goodbye in order to head to his classes without me. The two of us have classes together afterwards, but we're silent throughout them. During lunch, most of the conversation is between Langley and Ariel, who do their best to bring Quinton and me in, but Quinton rarely says a word while I awkwardly poke at my food that isn't at

all appetizing. That could be because it isn't good food or I'm feeling too shitty to eat it.

Everything between Quinton and me is tense to the point that it reminds me of when we first met. I don't feel like I can talk to him or him to me. Part of me actually feels that we're worse than when we first met. In the beginning, we fought physically, but I honestly would prefer that over the silence that preys on us throughout the day.

"Fix your shit," Langley orders me at the end of the day. "I can't stand the both of you being depressing little jerks."

"Tell him that," I hiss at the boy, who waves me off. "He's the one being difficult."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, just let him fuck you or something and everything will be solved." Langley runs off with Ariel before I get the time to tell him to jump off a very high bridge and die. Grumbling, I spin around in order to follow Quinton back to his dorm in silence again.

When we arrive, I take a seat on his bed and wait for him to take one beside me. He doesn't. Not going to lie, that stings a bit.

Seems silence is our new favorite hobby. It's as if our mouths are sewn shut, incapable of saying a word without the fear of starting up yet another argument, another new hobby of ours. I wish to say that the tense air dissipates upon entering his room, but it certainly does not. In all honesty, I believe it gets worse until it's actually difficult to breathe. Things feel so messed up to the point that I don't have a clue how to fix it. Oh yes, a personal favorite hobby of mine, seeing as I never seem to know how to fix things.

I want to though, desperately. I wrack my brain for answers that never come. I wonder if there's a way to return us to the teasing couple that we

once were or...or is this the end of the line for us?

That thought actually makes me whimper. The sound catches Quinton's attention. He focuses on me and asks, "What?"

I don't answer his question. I bite my lip to stall speaking. I've never really felt this way before. With Quinton I was always capable of speaking even if it was a taunt or out of anger, but now I can't bring myself to say a thing. If I taunt or tease him, I feel it'll bring on an argument. If I try to make things better by asking to help, it'll start an argument. I feel anything I say will bring about more fighting, so I choose to stand in silence.

Silence is beginning to feel more like protection. Protection from angering him, protection from ending the relationship that has really only just begun.

Quinton leans back against his desk, head down as he seems to think over what he wishes to say. I watch on in silence, which is a first for me. Quinton is lost in thought as he actually rocks a bit, barely, but I notice it. Even as he thinks, I keep myself in line by sitting still and waiting patiently. I never knew I could be so quiet for so long. I would mention how I deserve an award for such an action, but what Quinton has to say next not only stalls my thoughts but causes a train wreck within my mind that leaves it basically useless.

"Let's break up."

To say my world stopped spinning would be an understatement. It feels as if the earth itself has suddenly disappeared from beneath my feet and I'm forever falling into an abyss that crushes every part of me until all that's left is dust.

"W-What?" I squeak out, contemplating if earlier those girls had actually attacked me and I'm unconscious in the hospital. Please, let that be the case

because I don’t know if I can handle this. I’ve never prayed before, but I’m praying now, hoping some deity will take enough pity on me to listen.

Quinton lifts his head up to face me. Seeing the apathy on his face, like breaking up with me, is easier than tying his shoe, makes me want to hurl.

“You heard me,” he says, crossing his arms. He doesn’t take his dark eyes off me that seem to have returned to the cold and expressionless ones that he had when we first met. “Let’s break up.”

Hearing it a second time is as bad, if not worse, than the first. It becomes very hard to breathe. My lungs ache, as does the rest of my body that I can’t control as I stand before him in shock.

“Why? You’re joking, right?” I would stand up but I fear my legs, that won’t stop shaking, won’t be capable of holding me. I have to grip the blanket beside me in hopes of hiding how badly my hands are shaking. “If this is about your dad... I said I’m sorry—”

“It’s about a lot of things,” Quinton interrupts, his voice cold enough to drop the temperature in the room. I actually think it did as my body breaks out in goosebumps.

I wish to say that I believe this to be a joke or Quinton backing down out of fear, but he makes breaking up seem so easy. That face of his that I was thinking I could read, has now become unreachable. I know, even if I tried, I wouldn’t be able to keep a straight face, or even pull off making Quinton believe that I actually want to break up, yet he’s crushing my entire world without breaking a sweat. I would panic about how easily he can rip me to shreds, but I’m too busy being ripped to shreds to do that.

“I said I’m sorry...” I repeat, continuing to believe that it has to do with his privacy being invaded, but when he doesn’t forgive me, it leaves me wondering what else I am meant to say.

“We aren’t kids anymore. This relationship of ours was based on our mutual frustration towards one another. Frankly, we were doomed from the start.” Hearing him say what has been on my mind only hammers reality into me harder until I feel like I may just shatter into a million pieces across his floor.

“I thought we could handle it together, but those were naïve and childish thoughts,” he says, hesitating to add, “Being with you is a pain.”

I wince at his words that ring genuine enough that I actually have to bite the insides of my cheeks to hold back the tears.

A pain. I’m a pain.

I can’t even argue with that. No truer words have probably ever been spoken. No one can be my friend. No one can date me or even associate with me without having their lives displayed for everyone to see. Being with me is basically like standing before the world nude to see everything you have to offer, letting them scrutinize every piece of you that they deem undesirable and tear you to shreds. It’s hell, and yet I don’t want to let him go. To let us go.

“But we both knew this was going to happen, that people were going to talk about your past. If it was going to bother you so much, then why did you agree to date me in the first place?” I ask, my voice practically screaming how much his words are affecting me.

Part of me actually desires to punch myself in the face for being so obviously affected and so weak that all it takes is a few words to leave me shaking. Somehow, I work up the power to stand, though my entire body continues to shake.

It’s strange how I can go from pathetically heart broken to unbelievably pissed off in under two seconds. I question whether or not there is

something wrong with me, but I think it's Quinton. He just has that effect on me. The sorrow within me bubbles into an uncontrollable rage as I shake my head stubbornly.

With a deep breath, I somehow spoke without my voice breaking, "And things would only get worse after we came out, you knew that! We both knew it, so what is it that's bothering you? You claim that I'm a pain to be with and that's true, but you knew that from the start, so why would you lead me on just to break it off when I finally wanted to come out? You aren't making any sense!"

Quinton pushes himself from the desk in order to take a few menacing steps towards me. I hold up my fists as if I expect a fight because, for some reason, I feel there may be one. It hurts to think that. It hurts to think we are returning to our old ways that I have thought to be gone, out of our system, over for good, yet now our world has become drastically different.

When he doesn't attack me, or even raise his voice, I slowly relax until his words hit me with more force than a fist ever could. "I realized that the worst choice I've ever made was to be with you."

Whether or not Quinton knew it, he sucker punched me in the gut. I can't even stop a few tears from slipping as I think to myself, you're right.

"I can't live an even remotely normal life with you, and I've come to terms with the fact that I would rather have a life without you in it. We're from different worlds, Aron. Always have been and always will be, so…" He slowly makes his way over to his door, where he opens it and holds out his hand.

I watch, wait, search for any sign that he's screwing with me and this is all one terrible joke, but his face reveals nothing. For a while, I was confident enough to say that I have learned about him, how to read him, but now I

can’t see a damn thing. His eyes are shut off from me, from the world, as are his thoughts that are within them. There’s no sadness, no anger, nothing on his face to show me that this has been difficult for him.

I want to be confident and tell myself that he would never have claimed to like me if he didn’t. However, after hearing his words, after seeing how easily he has broken it off with me, I have no confidence what-so-ever. He basically said everything I feared anyone with me would end up feeling, and that has shattered every ounce of courage within me.

“Please leave,” he orders, gesturing once again out the door. His voice actually hurts to hear and I can’t bring myself to argue. Perhaps our feelings are much different because this is a cakewalk for him. Figures, Mr. Perfect after all, can’t even fail at a breakup.

I know there’s no point staying. I know I can’t be around him any longer. If he sees me break down, like I desperately want to, I fear it will only make me feel worse. He doesn’t stop me from walking out the door and I don’t bother looking back, either.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

I haven’t moved from my bed where I have been playing video games since yesterday afternoon. My eyes feel as if they have weights attached to them, yet I can’t seem to shut them for longer than an hour. I attempted to get some rest last night, however, I would awake from a dream that I desperately wished to be reality. I despise that feeling enough to keep myself awake regardless of how exhausted I feel.

The only way I can keep my mind off everything, the only way I can prevent myself from losing my shit, is by playing nonstop video games. I know if I stop, I won’t be able to handle the weight of my own thoughts. All the emotions swirling within me are enough to drive one mad. I don’t want to think about them. Don’t want to acknowledge they are there because I don’t have a clue how to handle them or where to go from here. My only solution is to play video games until I drop dead and I am hell bent on doing that until Langley arrives.

My best friend returns from class, which I skipped, to find me in the same place he left me this morning. The breakfast he had given me earlier to eat hadn't been touched and I'm sure that I look as bad, if not worse, than I feel.

"Have you slept at all?" Langley asks, tossing his bag to his bed before taking a seat on mine, blocking the TV.

I peer over him. "No."

Langley leans over to block my view again. I growl, kick him in the side, and adjust myself so I can see the TV until Langley grows tired of my antics. I shout at the bastard who dared to get up and shut off both the TV and my console.

"What the hell?" I huff.

"You've been playing games since yesterday and have yet to tell me what happened," Langley grumbles, returning to sitting on my bed.

When I returned yesterday as a walking zombie, Langley asked questions, but I refused to answer. After about ten minutes of questioning, I hid myself in the shower to pathetically cry for so long that my eyes ached. If Langley noticed my red eyes, he said nothing of it, allowing me peace until now.

"Nothing happened," I lie, not willing to admit that my acting this way has anything to do with He Who Shall Not Be Named because I can't even think of his name without getting depressed.

Langley snorts. "Bull crap. I'm assuming this has to do with Quinton."

"My life doesn't revolve around him," I grunt in response, getting up to turn my TV back on because talking about this is only making it harder. Before I get to the TV, Langley steps between me and the object of my desires. He places a hand against my chest as if to say 'that's far enough.'

"Let me play my game."

“Not until you tell me what happened,” he argues, pushing me back some with his hand.

I swat the hand away and shout, “I said let me play my game, Langley!”

“Quinton skipped today too.”

“Huh?” I blink rapidly from shock while my brain attempts processing this new information.

Langley takes my shock as an opportunity to continue. “Quinton wasn’t in class today either, so if you skipped and he skipped, then something happened.”

“Why... why would he skip though?” I ask, although there’s no way Langley can know the answer.

Hearing that Quinton didn’t go to class today pisses me off. So he breaks up with me, then attempts to avoid me by skipping? Ok, so I avoided him too by skipping but that’s because I was the one who he broke up with. He’s the one who broke it off, so he shouldn’t be at his dorm, making it seem like it was a hard thing to do!

“He shouldn’t be acting like seeing me would be a pain. He’s the freaking one who,” I make strangling motions in the air. “Argh!”

“Uh, do you mind telling me why you’re pretending to strangle Quinton?” Langley asks, watching me lose my mind, which wouldn’t have happened if he let me continue playing my game! See? This is why I was playing games. It helped me keep my cool, which is best for all of us.

“He broke up with me,” I blurt out, pacing the room as I angrily try to think about why Quinton would skip too. Clearly I mean nothing to him because he acted as if breaking up was easier than breathing, yet he skips? What is up with that?

“Oh.” Langley hums, seeming nervous and uncomfortable now that he knows why I’m acting the way I am. He bites his lip, showing off a concerned and confused expression, like he hasn’t a clue what to say or do next.

“Why?” Langley asks.

“Because I’m a pain to be with!” I holler, stopping in the center of the room as everything slips out. I knew it would. My mouth is like a dam. Once it breaks, everything’s going to flow out, which was why I was trying to avoid speaking with Langley about it! Screw him though, he asked for it by turning off my TV.

“He can’t handle being with me because everyone invaded his privacy, or at least that’s what I thought, but apparently we’re from different worlds and always will be. What the fuck kind of reason is that? He freaking knew from the start what was going to happen, but led me on anyway! Who is the immature brat now? Certainly not me, because he’s the one being a fucking asshole!” I scream, heaving long breaths afterwards that do little to calm my aching nerves.

Langley opens his mouth to speak but I’ve got more to say so I shut him up by continuing, “Then he freaking skips class? What? To avoid me?” I throw my arms wildly through the air while Langley watches on with concern. “Unlike him, I’m not some heartless piece of shit who can see him after what just happened! He shouldn’t go acting like it was difficult breaking up with me when he didn’t even break a sweat. You should have seen his face!”

I wave my hand up and down my face like Langley can somehow view the expression, or rather, the lack thereof, that Quinton showed that day. Obviously I can’t change my face so Langley hasn’t a clue, and he ends up

staring at me like I'm a lunatic while I continue my rant, "It was as expressionless as it used to be, like I don't, or rather didn't, mean a damn thing to him! Well fuck him, fuck everyone, I don't need anyone because they're all nothing but backstabbing assholes who will leave me the moment they get the chance!"

Tears fall now, not overflowing as I shall not allow such a thing to happen again. A few tears escape my eyes, that I rapidly blink to rid myself of this weakness. I turn my head to face Langley, whose eyes are wide and jaw hanging open. That expression leaves him and turns into a hurt one when I actually have the audacity to say, "You'll leave me one day, too."

"Why would you say that?" Langley asks, his voice low like he's been hurt. To be honest, I know he is, but it doesn't stop me from adding salt to his wound.

"Because one day you'll realize how much of a pain I am too," I spit out. Guilt, sorrow, and fear fill my stomach as I mumble the last bit. "The only thing I bring to people's lives is discomfort."

Langley shakes his head. He steps forward to place his hands on my shoulders. I flinch away from the touch, though he holds on tight to show that he isn't letting go.

"Listen, Aron, I don't know what Quinton said or what the hell made you think that way, but that is complete and utter shit. You are not a pain. You do not bring discomfort and I will never leave you. You're my best friend and, even if sometimes you drive me insane, I don't care because that's what best friends do." He squeezes my shoulders as if to tell me to just accept that I'm stuck with him. I don't agree but watch as he takes a deep breath and sighs, "Now, I am going to turn the TV back on and we're going

to play a crap ton of video games. Tomorrow you're going to go to class and things will get better bit by bit, ok?"

I nod only because the headache that I've gotten from shouting is making it difficult to think properly. Langley gives me a half smile that I don't return before finally giving me back the distraction I need. The two of us sit on the floor as we play, Langley doing his best to bring up conversation and me destroying the conversation every time by replying with a single word or nothing at all. He doesn't push me though and I wonder how I got myself such a good friend.

That night I lay awake in my bed, staring up at the ceiling as I try to count all the reasons I should resist the urge to send Quinton a text. There's actually a lot, however, I still find it difficult to listen to any of it. My phone rests innocently on the bedside table, yet I feel as if it's calling out to me. I look at the phone from the corner of my eye, examine the device, wait for it to buzz, but it never happens. It leaves me feeling dejected and angry, an odd combination that I dislike.

I snort at my own thoughts that continue wishing for my phone to light up with a message from the bastard, preferably one filled with an apology. Each time I look back over to see it as dark as it's been all day, the sorrow within me grows more, if that's even possible.

My fingers twitch atop my chest. Each time I go to reach for my phone, I remind myself how pathetic it would be of me to even attempt to talk with the jerk. He's the one who broke it off and I would come across as some annoying, desperate child wanting his attention. Telling myself that is the only way I can keep myself from doing something I'll regret, like calling him to cry into the receiver about how he's a freaking asshole and I'm a mess.

I roll onto my side to face away from my phone, hoping that it not being in my line of sight will help quell the temptation. It doesn't, but I try to tell myself it does. I sigh, I groan, I toss and turn, kick my legs and eventually sit up to throw my head in my hands. I feel sick, like any movement will make me upchuck. Somehow, I made it to the bathroom without incident. Sitting before the porcelain throne does not help me in the least bit. I remain feeling sick, which could be attributed to my thoughts that are running a mile a minute.

Maybe this is why I've never been in a relationship before, because the end of one hurts enough that the pain should be illegal. I don't know what to do or how to react. What do I do tomorrow if Quinton is there? What do I do if we run into one another or people ask why we aren't talking? How does one even go about their days smiling and laughing when the one who crashed everything around them is always within their sight?

This is impossible. I end up sitting before the toilet most of the night. I didn't get sick once, though, which kind of pisses me off. Normally after vomiting I feel a lot better so I guess the world really enjoys my misfortune because I continue feeling like utter garbage.

"Tell me you slept some," Langley sighs upon finding me the next morning in the bathroom with my butt basically glued to the cool floor.

"Sure," I lie, pushing myself up so I can give him time to get ready. "A bit."

"By a bit, you mean?"

"Maybe three hours."

Langley runs his hand through his hair. "Maybe you should skip again. I doubt going to class on three hours of sleep when you normally take naps during the day and rest like eight hours at night is a good idea."

“Staying locked up in here on my own isn’t a splendid idea either,” I answer, thinking about how I would probably play games all day or even end up calling the bastard. Sure, I will see him today, but it will be easier to control myself in public than alone.

Langley nods, seeming to agree and informs me to get ready. I do as I’m told and half ass everything, not that I don’t do that normally, but I put in even less work today. Langley even had to go back to grab my bag because I had somehow forgotten it.

“Am I going to have to hold your hand throughout the day?” He teases, probably hoping to get a laugh out of me. He doesn’t succeed, and the boy ends up frowning.

“If you need to leave, go ahead and leave,” Langley says as we grow close to my first period, which I share alone with Quinton.

I nod. “Believe me, I will.”

With that, Langley hesitantly says his goodbye to me until the next period. I don’t bother with a response and, very slowly, make my way to class. I stand outside the door, gripping my bag strap with enough force that I worry I may actually break it. With a deep breath, I step inside, keeping my head down as I walk straight past the desk I once shared with Quinton and to an empty spot in the back.

I only saw Quinton’s side from the corner of my eye. I refuse to look his way as I make myself comfortable in this new seat. I sit down, keep my eyes locked on the desk and chant to myself, don’t look at him, don’t look at him, don’t fucking look at him.

Thankfully, my chant is not capable of failing just yet because someone’s voice brings my attention away from my panicking thoughts to them.

“Your Highness, what are you doing back here?” A voice asks, bringing my eyes up to meet theirs. It’s a young girl that I recognize as someone I’ve shared previous classes with. I think her name is Marla? Let’s go with that because I rather not ask. One would think I would be good at remembering names, but that’s not the case, especially when the only people I really interact with are Langley, Ariel and the demonic hell spawn.

“Decided on a change of scenery,” I reply, wondering why it’s any of her business. However, my answer seems to make her happy because she smiles widely.

“Oh, that’s great,” she says, puzzling me.

“Is it?” I ask, cocking a brow.

“Of course, it’s better if you associate less with,” Her eyes dart ahead. For a moment, I follow their path, then stop myself from doing so when I hear her say his name. “Quinton.”

“Oh?” I inquire, my throat having run dry just from hearing his name. “What makes you say that?”

I know the answer, but am asking the question anyway. I’m asking to be pissed off and, yes, I still get angry upon hearing the girl say as if it’s obvious, “He’s bad news, of course. You can do much better than him.”

Before I get the chance to blow a top, Marla excuses herself and skips off to her own desk close to my own. My hands clench into fists, accidentally tearing the paper beneath, which I rip from my notebook and crumble. I continue to grip the paper with my hand like some sort of stress ball. I taste metallic and realize that I have bitten my lip hard enough to draw blood.

He broke up with me. I’m pissed at him yet I can’t even deny that hearing other’s shit talk him makes my blood boil. I am shit talking to him in my

head to make me feel better, but when others continue calling him bad news, a mistake, or a bad choice, it continues to infuriate me.

As if I have a sixth sense, the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. The action causes me to observe the room for whoever has their attention on me. I spot the culprit almost immediately. I regret it instantly, though. Locking eyes with obsidian ones that I've been desperately avoiding makes me nearly snap. When I say snap, I don't have a clue if I mean break down into a crying mess or turn into a raging psycho, maybe a bit of both.

Upon realizing that he's been caught staring, Quinton turns to focus on the board as if staring at me isn't a big deal. Oh, but it is because this glimmer of hope bubbles within my stomach that maybe he's just being difficult and we can talk this out. After all, Quinton is always difficult.

I crush that hope by repeating the words he said to me over and over until I'm nothing but a raging ball of emotion. The feelings irritate me enough to grab my things and storm out of class. Somewhere behind me I hear questioning, most likely from our teacher, that I ignore in order to hide out in the library.

I can't do it. I can't be in the same room as him. I'll end up doing something stupid, so I remain in the library until second period where I make my way to class to find Langley and Ariel. I know the only way to keep my sanity is by spending time with friends. Even if I don't feel any desire to laugh or smile, seeing others do it is enough to remind me that, at some point, things will get better.

Ariel smiles upon seeing me, but she doesn't look worried, so I take that as Langley hasn't told her anything.

“Hello!” Ariel chirps. “Are you feeling alright? You skipped yesterday, so I thought you may have been sick.”

“I see Langley hasn’t filled you in.” I sigh, sitting in front of Langley and looking back to find Ariel whipping her head between me and her boyfriend.

“Filled me in?” she asks with a cock of her head. “What happened?”

“Quinton and I broke up,” I answer, my voice hardly above a whisper. I pick absentmindedly at my shirt buttons, most likely helping to rip them off at some point, but I don’t care. For some reason, I wish to keep my hands busy, probably because I fear if I don’t, people will notice the way they’re shaking.

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted me to blab about it,” Langley scratches nervously at the back of his neck while Ariel sits there, flabbergasted.

“Why so shocked?” I ask. “We all know Quinton isn’t the most caring of people.”

“That’s,” Ariel throws a hand over her lips that form into a frown. “I’m just... did you two have a fight or something?”

I shrug. “Not that I know of, but it’s over and that’s that.”

Ariel seems very reluctant to hear such a thing. She gives me a quizzical look that she gives to Langley too, who shrugs to show he hasn’t a clue what she’s questioning him about. Ariel faces me again, shakes her head a few times before asking, “Did he say why he wanted to break up?”

“I’m a pain. We’re from different worlds. It was dumb of us to even date, so on so forth.” I wave my hand dismissively while recalling the events. I really don’t feel like elaborating further or continuing this conversation. “Let’s not talk about it.”

“But you need to,” Ariel interjects.

I’m so shocked that she actually interrupted me. I can’t bring myself to say a thing. Ariel has certainly become more laid-back around me, but she’s never interrupted me before.

“You need to talk to him,” she declares, like I shouldn’t question her.

“There’s no talking needed. He broke it off, and it’s over,” I hiss, squirming in my seat as I look to the clock in hopes of the bell to ring. We’ve got about two minutes, so if it could speed up, that would be great.

“I don’t believe that Quinton is telling the truth,” Ariel blurts out, reaching across the aisle to grip my hands within hers. I attempt to pull them away, but the small girl actually has quite the grip. I would rather not hurt her by pulling any harder so I allow Ariel to rub my hands as she speaks, “I saw Quinton on Saturday get into that fight and promised not to tell you about it because we both knew it would upset you.”

“What?” I ask, half shocked Ariel would keep such a thing from me and half shocked that Quinton would trust her to do so. They usually only talked during lunch. Even then, Ariel was hesitant around him. She’s still getting used to him.

Ariel nods vigorously and shows me a face of determination. “He didn’t get into that fight because anyone was teasing him. They were teasing you.”

Me? I don’t even have time to respond before Ariel is continuing.

“In fact, if you haven’t noticed, he never gets angry hearing anything about what others have to say about him. He got into that fight and he gets mad because it’s you, they insult. If he didn’t care, why would he get so mad about that?” She asks, showing the absolute confidence she has in her own belief. “I don’t know what he could be thinking or what he has planned, but whatever he said to you to break up, I know he didn’t mean it.”

“Then why would he say it?” I ask, not even sure why I’m asking. It’s like I want a reason to talk to him. No, I know it’s because I want a reason to talk to him.

“We’re a bunch of kids, Aron,” Ariel answers, shrugging. “We aren’t wise or perfect. Even Quinton must get scared, must feel lost and sometimes makes bad decisions, really bad decisions, but whatever decision he made, I know it was made to help or protect you in some way. It may not have been right. It may not have been the best move, but it was what he felt he had to do. Know what I mean?”

I go to reply. With what? I don’t know because after hearing Ariel speak, I’m drawing a blank.

The bell rings and I curse the universe for its timing. Ariel pats my hand as if to say, think about it, before relinquishing her grip. I glance at Langley, who nods, seeming to agree with his girlfriend. There’s no time to argue with either of them, seeing as our teacher has begun class. I don’t pay attention to any of it. How could I after that?

The entire day I’m lost in thought, incapable of paying attention to a thing. Neither Ariel nor Langley bring up our conversation from second period, which I am grateful for. It’s hard enough thinking about it alone, so admitting a thing out loud would be much worse.

Ariel and Langley do their best to help my mood throughout the day by telling jokes or stories. I am grateful to them both for trying, though I never give them the reaction they want. Their attempts help me from going ballistic on everyone who tries to bother me, and that’s a plus, I guess.

I skip all the classes I share with Quinton because the idea of being in the same room with him is unsettling even after Ariel’s speech. Even if there’s this hope rising within me, it doesn’t mean I want to act on it because there

is fear as well. Fear that Ariel is wrong, that I'm wrong, and Quinton is as uncaring as he seems to be. I fear speaking to him and learning the truth, that he really doesn't care. I think I rather have a little hope than know the truth.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Avoiding someone isn't as hard as one might think. It is actually fairly easy but that may also have to do with the fact that not only am I avoiding Quinton, but Quinton is also avoiding me. There have been no calls, no text, no interactions with one another other than passing glances or eye contact for a mere second in the halls. After each brief encounter, I'm left conflicted. I wish to speak with him while also never wanting to see his stupid face ever again.

It has been a week since our breakup. The week has been an interesting one to say the least. I thought our break up would be the end of annoying things, that I would mope and get over it as time went on. However, there seems to be a new trend in my life that I do not appreciate in the least bit.

"You're not spending time with Quinton?"

"Are you fighting? Oh, that's great!"

"It's best for you both that you do not associate."

“He’s nothing but trouble.”

“You can do better.”

“You’ve made the right choice to end your friendship.”

“Shut up!” I finally snap at some poor student who copied what everyone has been saying in some shape or form.

The guy stares at me wide-eyed until I hiss him away. He goes running off with his tail between his legs. Everyone stares at me as if I’ve suddenly grown a second head. I continue my path towards the library, the place that I used to think was meant for anyone unlike me, but now see as a sanctuary. It’s a place where everyone is quiet and, most of them, leave me be. Right now, I really need to be left be. I know how Quinton felt before when he kept requesting I leave him alone. It’s beyond difficult controlling myself around just about everyone, even Langley and Ariel.

I’m so angry all the time. Every second of every minute of every day, all I feel is this raging inferno in my stomach. No matter how hard I try to put out the fire, the flames continue growing. Though I can sit through a class with Quinton in the room, all I can do is glare at the board or my homework, half expecting the pages to burst into flames from the heat. It’s not just Quinton though. Honestly, my anger is directed at everyone.

I run my hands over my face in aggravation. All week, all freaking week, people have been saying how great it is that Quinton and I are no longer associating. Even a few teachers have been caught saying how they’re happy to see me choosing better friends. What kind of teacher says that?! The students I can understand, but teachers, too? I thought adults were supposed to be smart, however, the entire world is full of assholes!

The entire school buzzes with this new gossip that Quinton and I have had a falling out. There are all sorts of rumors, ranging from we had a simple

argument to he attempted to kill me. Yeah, there's actually a rumor about that, which makes me wonder how some of these kids even made it into this school. Their parents have to be loaded; says the prince.

It's so aggravating because I can't even be that mad at the jerk when I'm busy being mad at all the other jerks! I don't know how to react when someone walks up to me and says, "You've made the right choice," or "You can do so much better!"

I want to agree, especially after what he said to me, albeit there is a much larger piece of me that desires to grab their face and slam it into the nearest object until it or their face shatters.

I'm only just now noticing all the badmouthing that has been said about me as well. Online videos, journals, talk shows, the online and real world is fixated on us. I've been digging through everything to discover endless articles claiming that I make bad decisions, that I got into fights in high school because I couldn't control my anger, and all kinds of other bullshit, but one thing remains in common throughout them all; Quinton.

I fought with Quinton so he's a bad influence. I hang out with Quinton, whose father is a murderer, so he's a bad choice. What kind of prince would get into a fistfight with another student? What kind of prince can't even decipher a good person from an evil one? Quinton is a bad choice. Quinton is a flaw, my mistake.

No one wants to bring up how intelligent Quinton is or how he's got into Thorton on a scholarship. No one wants to mention how my grades went from average to straight A's. No one wants to get to know Quinton or me. They simply look at what's on the outside and make judgements based upon that. All they want to focus on is the bad things because, as human beings, we strive off the misfortune of others.

I never got much of a chance to pay attention to the news or any other media outlet. I've never been one for caring what celebrities were doing in the world. I read whatever my father wished of me to read, which definitely aren't articles about how shitty of a prince I am. I've been too busy with school and the crap going on with Quinton to care about anything else. Now I see, though, that it isn't just Quinton and his life being dragged through the dirt, but also my own.

"*He got into that fight and he gets mad because it's you they insult. If he didn't care, why would he get so mad about that?*" That's what Ariel said.

I slam my head into the desk at the library, earning myself a shush from the evil librarian. I ignore her shushing in order to slam my head on the desk a second and a third time. After torturing myself for a minute, I raise my head to glare death at the computer screen that is full of nothing but articles written about me over the last few weeks trash talking about me and even my parents. How could they have raised a boy who can't even control his anger? The king and queen aren't really raising us a very good future ruler, are they? It's ridiculous how my father can go from so loved to hated in a second.

However, the trash talking has slowly died down throughout the week. Suddenly, no one remembers my bad choices anymore. The news slowly changes from the error of my ways, my bad choices and my fights to other things. Even talk of Quinton and his father has died down, at least in the media. It's still the talk of our school, which makes sense in a sick way.

Ariel's words have been ringing in my mind as I flip over all the facts that have now presented themselves to me. The entire time I have been so focused on Quinton that I never realized I was being as invaded as he was. None of that mattered to me though, because I can handle it. I've always

been talked about, being who I am means that people are not always pleased with me. However, Quinton is not accustomed to the attention, so that bothered me. It also bothered me that no one cared enough to give him a chance and rather made assumptions about him based on his father.

The thing is; I never really thought about how Quinton felt after hearing all the awful statements said about me. It never crossed my mind that hearing such things would bother him, yet Ariel claims that the only time she saw him get riled up was when I was being insulted. Perhaps Quinton is the same as me. Perhaps hearing all the bad things said about me made him angry, but that's normal. We're dating. We were dating, so of course it would aggravate us to hear others speaking badly about the ones we cared about. Why would we break up because of that?

I bury my face in my hands, groaning into my palms as I try to decipher the puzzle that is Quinton. It makes little sense to me and the more I think about it, the less it makes sense until my head is pounding so hard I fear it may actually break.

This sucks. What am I meant to do now? Quinton got into a fight because he was angry about hearing people teasing me? So I've heard. That makes it seem like he cares, but I'm a pain, aren't I? How am I supposed to know if Ariel is right or not? Does he care or not? I can't just go ask him either. Knowing him, he'll deny having any feelings for me whatsoever because of whatever stupid crap is going on in his mind.

Can't he just talk to me so we don't go through this? I don't know what to do here. I don't know how to bring up a conversation with him. If he really wanted us to work out, then he wouldn't have broken up with me, right? Running back to him, to bother him, is nerve-wracking and I can't bring myself to do it.

The bell ringing signals the end of my school day, though I don’t have the desire to move. I know it will be in my best interest to do so, seeing as the library is one of the most likely places to run into Quinton. That thought makes me finally tear myself from the desk to make my way as quickly as possible out of there.

In the back of my mind I hear pleading, the desire to stay and ‘accidentally’ run into him so we can make up somehow. I ignore those thoughts, block out every sound, and continue on my path to the dorms. I maneuver my way around students, completely ignoring any and all comments thrown my way. Whether anyone is annoyed or confused by my actions is something I do not care about. All I care about is getting to my dorm before I do something stupid, like turn around and attempt to fumble my way through a conversation with Quinton that will end with disaster.

However, the universe has other plans in store for me because I run into the one person who I have desperately been trying to avoid for the past week. When I say run into, I mean it literally, full on impact after turning a corner that has the both of us stumbling backwards as our things scatter. My eyes remain locked onto an onyx gaze that has yet to take themselves off me either. Our things lay across the floor, blocking the path of a few students that stop to watch.

What’s so interesting about two people running into each other is beyond me, but when it comes to me, every little thing I do is fascinating. I bet people would watch me breathe for hours and write a story about it.

Back to my currently panicking mind, though, I can’t bring myself to utter a word as my mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water. Quinton remains apathetic, as per usual, helping my panic slowly turn into anger.

Before that anger makes a fool out of me, some classmates come to my rescue. Beside me, a few people pick up my belongings to return to me. They make sure to leave Quinton's on the ground. My nose twitches. My belongings are handed back to me just as Quinton gets verbally attacked by anyone nearby.

The first comes from the girl who helped pick up my books. I feel slightly bad for not remembering any of the names of my classmates, but how am I supposed to when none of them ever really talk to me? That thought only makes me more curious why they are all defending me so much. And I am once again reminded that I will forever be treated differently for who I am, and that pisses me off.

"Are you bothering our prince again?" The brunette asks, hands on her hips as she takes a menacing step towards Quinton. "Don't you think you've done enough damage to him already?"

What damage has he done to me? I try to think back on something, but nothing comes to mind. That they know of, at least. However, people agree with her questions because others are shouting things like 'yeah' and 'get lost.'

Now a few guys step up to 'help' by standing around me as if to form a protective circle. If anything, I feel less safe with them at my side. One has the audacity to reach out and shove Quinton hard. Quinton doesn't fight back or even make a move to retaliate in any way.

"He's been dragged through the dirt because of you. He's finally seen you as the trash that you are so why don't you leave him alone?" The guy who pushed Quinton asks, earning himself a very confused look from me.

Soon there are many words being thrown at Quinton that I have been hearing all week. I can do better. He's no good for me. He's a bad influence,

and one that really hits me hard, *you're being a pain*. My mind latches onto that phrase that has been said to me. Now, I'm beginning to believe it was said to him first.

Quinton, who has yet to show any sign of retaliation, finally gets a moment to speak. The halls fall silent when he takes a breath to say, "Sorry for having run into you, Your Highness."

My eyes widen at hearing the title he has only ever used ironically. Quinton has teasingly called me many things, but now it's as if he's putting a wall between us with his words alone. He didn't even say my name. To make the situation worse, he actually bows. He bows before grabbing his things and walking past me without a second glance. The stinging sensation in my gut can only be described as brutal. Around me others are speaking, saying things such as he'll learn his place or good riddance. Their words mean nothing to me while Quinton's echoes in my mind.

Earlier, I said it made no sense. I didn't understand why Quinton would break up over something like the media being their normal rude selves. However, now I feel I understand it. It hits me and I am tempted to physically hit myself for not realizing it sooner.

A week ago, I was an immature prince with more flaws than anything else. I made bad choices, got into fights and was a poor judge of character. Now, a week later after Quinton has left my life, I'm seen as the good prince again. My slate has been wiped clean simply because I removed Quinton from my life. Quinton is my mistake, my flaw that the world cannot accept, will not accept, and will always use to tear me down.

Quinton, being the smart sack of garbage that he is, probably knew that once we broke up, things would return to the way they once were. I would be the beloved prince that everyone stood up for and protected while he

would go back to being hated by most of the school. For some reason, he assumed that things would be better that way...

But what the fuck gives him the right to make that decision on his own? Who the hell said I was ok with that or agreed with it in any way?

I'm not doing this anymore. I'm not running away from the fight. Most would probably say that I either choose Quinton or choose being future king. I say I choose both because being king is my responsibility and I will not run from it. However, making myself happy is also my responsibility and the one who makes me happy is Quinton. I will not let others rule my life. I'm going to make my own decisions and if the world hates me for picking Quinton, then so be it. I will fight back. I will stand my ground. I will show them they won't break me so easily. I'm Aron fucking Vaughn, the prince, the future king and I'm not getting stepped on anymore.

"Shut the hell up!" I bellow, spinning around to face the direction Quinton walked in. My voice bounces throughout the halls and successfully garners the attention of everyone, including the hell spawn walking away. Though he doesn't turn back, he stops in his tracks and I wonder if he has hope that I've realized the truth or perhaps he's dreading it.

Either way, I don't care as the truth hammers itself into me faster and faster until all I can do is move forward without thinking. My head is clear, yet my mind feels heavier than ever. There's this very nervous part of me that continues whispering, but if you're wrong because I could be entirely off base. However, I know that even if I am wrong, it's better that I hear the truth from him rather than go on with this stupid decision of his. If I don't do this now, I will regret it for the rest of my life.

That thought alone is what drives me in a beeline straight to Quinton. He hears me coming and barely has time to turn around before I've gripped his

biceps, keeping him locked in place. He dislikes the hold, showing it immediately through his face by scowling.

“Let go,” he orders in a voice hardly above a whisper.

“No,” I reply sternly, ignoring the lingering students around us. “We’re going to talk.”

Quinton rolls his eyes. He either knows me too well or is tired of the attention because he says, “Some place else.”

“No. We’re talking right here for everyone to see and everyone to hear,” I say loud enough for everyone to hear because I want them to. It’s causing people to give us quizzical looks. Some bring out their phones, most likely because they suspect us to have a fistfight that they haven’t seen in over a year.

Quinton’s scowl morphs into a look of confusion. “Have you finally lost it?” he hisses.

“Yeah, think whatever you want but shut up and let me talk,” I snarl, hoping to show that I am done with his shit, with everyone’s shit, and he is going to stand there and listen to me, damn it!

Again, in the back of my mind, there’s the fear that I am totally off base. That he’s going to end up laughing in my face for my stupidity, but I push all those thoughts back by, and I rather jump off a cliff than say this out loud, remembering every wonderful moment that we shared. I focus on the feelings that I had at those moments, hold on to them, cherish them and think about how I rather have all that back, even if it means possibly humiliating myself.

So, with a deep breath, I spew out of my wit, because it’s the thing I’m best at, “What I am about to say can be totally wrong and just a bunch of crap I made up in my head in hopes to explain why we broke up.”

That definitely caught people's attention because now everyone is whispering. I ignore them.

"Originally, I thought it was because I really was a pain and only brought you discomfort. Honestly, who can be with me and actually enjoy their lives when they can't walk out the door without paparazzi stalking them?" Yes, humor, about the only thing to keep me from pissing myself.

"But after this week, after what just happened a second ago, I'm realizing that you and I actually felt the same. I was so pissed hearing everyone make assumptions about you and who you are simply because your dad was a monstrous bastard. It bothered me that no one saw the intelligent, cool and, damn it, even kind guy, that I know you are! I didn't even have time to notice that I was being as assaulted as you were. After hearing what those jerks said to you today, I'm thinking that similar things have been said to you and it made you think things would be better if we ended our relationship entirely. Well, that's not your fucking choice to make alone!"

Quinton's stumped to hear that's what I led up to. I didn't even know what I was leading up to! I've been kind of rolling with it and whatever I decided to say. I still don't have a clue what to say next.

Quinton cocks his head to the side and asks, "Whose choice is it, then?"

"Ours!" I shout at the one who is acting like the real idiot here. "We are meant to make that choice together! I never once said that you were a pain, or that I was bothered by what others said about me. You are not a mistake. You are not my mistake. You are not my flaw. You're the exact opposite. I don't give a shit about their opinion because the only opinion that matters to me is yours!"

I only now realize how badly I'm shaking. The grip I once had on Quinton is now nothing more than my arms barely clinging to his jacket.

Slowly, I allow my hands to drop to my side, where they shiver and twitch with each passing second of his silence. All around me are eyes and whispers that leave my heart racing, not that it wasn't before. My throat has run dry. I feel sick. The world seems to tilt and I wonder if it's possible for a human to feel so much all at once without turning into mush.

"I'm not letting others rule over me anymore. I am the prince and the future king and I will not run away from my responsibilities like some spoiled child. However, I will not let that ruin my future with you, either." I swing my arms in the air, gesturing to all those around us. "It doesn't matter anymore now. Everyone knows we dated. Tomorrow, hell maybe even tonight, the news will have their story of how the prince dated the son of a serial killer, so you don't have to protect me, to protect us anymore. Tell me right now that I'm wrong, that everything I said a moment ago was bullshit and you see me as nothing more than a hindrance in your life, and I will walk away. I will leave you alone. I will take the fall, but I need for you to speak the truth. I need to hear it, Quinton."

It's out. It's all out. Everyone heard it. Hell, some people have taped it. There is no use denying it, no use lying, because I have thrown both our secrets out on the table. This could either lead to disaster—ok, let's face it, either way there will be disaster, but it could also finally make Quinton admit to me what has really been on his mind.

Quinton's silence is unnerving, as is his apathetic expression that hasn't left since we ran into each other. However, the longer we stand there, the more I notice how his eyes soften until they are practically screaming at me to drop this, to let it go, to walk away and let his plan stay as is. At least, that is what I'm assuming is going on in his head. For all I know, he could be concocting how to build a death ray.

I bite my lip, hop from one foot to the other, tug at my hair until I grow tired of his silence. I ask him to reply to me, to give me something, anything, but he doesn't move. He doesn't say a thing. All he does is avert his gaze to the floor where it stays there until the sorrow eats away at my stomach. I take his silence as his answer. I take his silence as his way of saying that we're over, no matter how much I beg or try to make sense of it all. We're done. He's made his decision, and I made a fool out of myself for nothing.

Those around us are still interested because, as I said before, as humans, we take an interest in the misfortunes of others. I do my best to back away with some dignity. It takes every ounce of will to keep the tears from falling. I keep my head held high and clench my hands to make them stop shaking. It's hard not to give in to the desire to fall over and sob in a corner. My chest feels heavy and I wonder if someone can actually die from being heartbroken, because the pain I feel at this moment is worse than death.

"You want to hear the truth!" Quinton shouts, stopping me dead in my tracks. I doubt someone yelling about a bomb nearby could get me moving. All I can do is turn to focus on Quinton and how we've traded places.

His finesse is gone. He is no longer the boy standing tall without a single trace of fear. That apathetic expression has finally cracked in order to show that deep down Quinton is exactly like every other teenage boy. He's scared. He's worried. He's caring. He's not always right. He's making his way through life, learning about himself every day and hiding behind a mask when he hasn't a damn clue how to react. For once, he's showing all this through a nervous expression that I've never seen on him before. I both love and hate it.

“After hearing you say what’s been on my mind as if you can see right through me, one would think that you know me better than I know myself,” he says, his voice actually shaking as if he fears what he has to say next more than anything. I question what could make him act in such a way but..."If that is the case, then it should be obvious how I feel. I love you, dumb ass!"

I see now.

I see why he’s biting his lip hard enough to break skin. I understand why he can’t stop shaking. I understand why he didn’t want to say it because, deep down, everyone fears their feelings being too strong or not returned. There is nothing scarier than admitting you love someone and having your feelings thrown back in your face. Quinton must have known his feelings for some time and the thought of all the turmoil he went through, how he lied to my face in hopes to protect me, to keep me held up high on a pedestal that others had put me on only makes me realize that the feelings I have towards Quinton are the same.

I don’t care that everyone is watching. I don’t care that our faces will be plastered all over the news tomorrow. All I care about is getting Quinton back in my arms where he belongs, and I will do my damn best to keep him there.

I all but throw myself at him, wrapping my arms around Quinton after what feels like an eternity. He does the same, quickly curling his arms around my neck with a grip so tight I have to remind him I need to breathe, but only for a moment before I pull him into a kiss full of nothing but raw, powerful emotion that takes my breath away.

I don’t care about oxygen or the need to breathe because all I want to feel are his lips on mine where everyone can see so that we no longer have to

put up this façade. No more lies. No more hiding behind closed doors. No more holding hands in the dark. I'm going to kiss him and hold him and hug him all I want so everyone can see. I don't care what others say. I don't care if they think I can do better because I know that the best thing I could ever have is Quinton and I am ok with that, more than ok.

It isn't until we pull apart, breathing heavily yet remaining so close that our lips linger before one another that I finally say what I know I've been feeling for some time, "I love you too, asshole."

I'm reminded in that moment how beautiful Quinton's smile is. I've seen a couple over the last few months, but this one... this one is the best. He doesn't look like the stoic boy that I know so well, but more like a child that is too happy to put it into words, so he attempts to show it through an ear splitting smile that's bright enough to blind. Big, bright, giddy, like a kid that has won a prize, and that smile is all for me. I smile just as stupidly back, completely ignoring any and all comments being thrown our way.

I grab his hand that intertwines with my own immediately. Feeling his fingers between mine as we run past our classmates is exhilarating, and it's a feeling that I don't think I will ever tire of. After today, we won't hide anymore. The truth is out.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The relief washing over me after finally revealing the truth is almost enough to bring me to tears. There's so much relief, happiness, excitement all bundled together within me that all I can do is smile like some kindergarten as I kiss Quinton over and over until I think my lips may be swollen. Who cares though, because the idea of pulling away from him now isn't even crossing my mind!

I may slam him against his bedroom door rougher than I meant to, but we're both a little over excited here. Quinton doesn't mind though as he flicks his wrist to lock the door behind us. There we stay, me pressing him back while my hands quickly work on relieving him of his stupid jacket and shirt because I haven't got my hands on him in a while and the desire to do so is overtaking all other thoughts I have.

Quinton agrees with my idea of removing clothes based on how his hands work to unbutton my shirt. I chuckle into the kiss at the few slip ups of his

fingers. To show the chuckling isn't appreciated, he takes my bottom lip between his teeth. I would be lying if I said I didn't find it hot. Let's continue letting him believe that's a punishment. I really don't care. I have more pressing matters, like getting his damn shirt off because the plans I have involve nudity.

Sadly, our moment of exploration is ruined by the sound of laughter behind the door. We hesitate and pull apart, listening to those passing by. Probably wasn't the best idea to start this when classes ended. Most students are returning to their dorms first, meaning others may hear us. Part of me thinks who cares, but I wouldn't much appreciate hearing my neighbors going at it like rabbits either.

However, Quinton and his freakishly functioning mind always have a plan. He pushes himself from the door to drag me behind him. I'm about to ask what exactly we're doing until Quinton tugs at my shirt and jacket, pushing them partially down my shoulders. I shake off the garments just as he throws both of his off as well. Now he's working on my pants, somehow doing that and walking backwards towards the bathroom at the same time.

Ok, seriously, no one should be able to multitask like that. I can't even brush my teeth and dress myself, let alone undo his pants while walking!

"Want to take a shower?" Quinton asks, wearing a smirk that says everything I need to know.

"Sounds like a plan." I nod, eager for whatever he has in mind so long as it involves him getting undressed and continuing to let me touch him as I please.

Quinton adds to his plan by turning on the TV as we pass by. He wouldn't have that TV if the school didn't provide one. I bet this is the first time he

has turned it on himself. Normally I'm the one who uses it. Either way, the noise from the TV helps.

"Be useful," Quinton says moments before pushing me towards his bedside table.

I look back at him with a glare, only to see that he has his pants and boxers dropped around his ankles where he kicks the garments away to remind me I am way too worked up to care about arguing. So, while walking backwards, because there's no chance I'm looking away, I make my way to the bedside table where my hands fumble to reach within for a bottle of lube and condoms. Keeping them here is safer since Langley would kill me with constant teasing if I didn't.

Quinton makes his way into the bathroom with me hot on his tail. How sad that I can admit that. He turns on the shower, gesturing for me to follow. Of course I do, quickly removing myself from my own stuffy pants and boxers, leaving the condoms and lube on the sink, then hopping into the shower after the sexually frustrating bastard.

Quinton doesn't hesitate to throw his arms around my waist. Our lips seek each other out with a sense of hunger that I didn't know either of us could possess. My hands won't stop feeling every inch of skin that twitches and trembles at my touch. I love the feeling of this, knowing that it's me who can invoke reactions out of the normally reactionless Quinton. It's a type of honor, like a prize given to me, that I will make sure always belongs to only me.

The friction created between us makes my thighs shake with need. I press Quinton roughly against the wall where I keep him there by thrusting my hips into his. Our mouths slide apart in order for me to ravish his neck, making sure that there will be marks because we don't need to hide

anymore. I don’t have to kiss him where others can’t see. I can leave marks like a sign for everyone to fuck off.

Groaning, Quinton elongates his neck, giving me more access. I’m understanding why vampires have a thing for necks. They are quite appetizing and I do not know where my mind goes at times like this.

Quinton reaches for the condom and lube on the bathroom sink while I continue marking his nape. It isn’t until the lube is shoved into my chest that I retreat. I stare wide-eyed at Quinton, who stares right back. There’s a light dusting of pink beneath his eyes that I could attribute to the situation at hand, though something tells me it has to do with what he’s saying without words.

“Really?” I ask, mentally kicking myself because that may make him change his mind.

When Quinton simply nods, it sinks in that this is happening. Sure, I knew one day we’d switch things up, but I didn’t expect this to happen today. I need some time to mentally prepare!

I nervously sputter while he rolls his eyes and, damn it, turns around to brace himself against the wall. I stand here, frozen, staring at the sight that I have been blessed with. I don’t know how to explain the heat coursing through me now. It’s practically like magma in my veins. I kiss his back, that shifts between tensed and relaxed. I can’t blame him. I felt the same way during our first time.

To say I’m nervous as I shakily pour lube onto my hand would be an understatement. Fear festers in my gut that I’m somehow going to mess this up. Quinton will never give me such an opportunity again. I’m going to scar him for life, or some shit. Thinking of sex in theory is entirely different from performing it in real life. I don’t want this to be a bad memory for

him. I don’t want to mess this up. I don’t want the trust that he’s showing me to go away.

Taking a deep breath, I remind myself that Quinton has given me permission. He trusts me enough not to be a complete failure. This is about as much of a compliment as I’m going to get.

Nodding to myself for whatever dumb reason, I reach around his waist to pleasure him. Quinton groans, then tenses when my fingers press against him. I might have read something online that using my mouth might make this better, but I admit I’m a little too nervous for that yet.

Quinton’s spine tenses. He rests his head against the wall. For a moment, I think I’ve hurt him until I notice the blush. My cheeks break out into a smile. I keep my taunts at bay because he’s way too cute to disturb.

This tentative rhythm continues, hoping beyond hope that he feels as good as I did. Then my fingers curl and Quinton shivers. I don’t know if that’s a good sign until I do it again and he releases a low moan. Quinton moves beneath my questing lips. His flushed features bring a smile to my face, one that brightens when he leans towards me in a silent request. I kiss him hard because why would I ever resist such an offer? Our kissing doesn’t stop, messy and desperate, moans caught between our lips.

I’m happy to say that Quinton’s hips start moving, pressing against my fingers. I’m at my breaking point, burning up with desire. The nerves within me dwindle. Taking the desperate movement of his hips as a sign that he’s ready, I finally pull both hands away that have him growling at me. The sound makes me chuckle. Doing so makes him glare at me as if to say it isn’t funny. Oh, but it is. Sweet revenge!

I grab the condom from the sink and rush to put it on before the nerves return full force. Thankfully, I succeed in my task and grip Quinton’s hips.

All I can do is pathetically groan against Quinton's shoulder. Feeling his tension is enough to keep me from doing what I desperately wish to do; pull out and thrust back in because, fuck, I really want to. My thighs shake, barely able to prevent me from stumbling over. Oh fuck, what if I do? Is that possible? Can your knees just give out?

Quinton heaves a long breath before pressing his body against me. The slightest movement of his hips makes my vision line white. My movements start out slow until Quinton's meeting every touch. My hold on his hips is practically painful. I can't think properly. Can't think of anything other than moving because it all feels too fast and too slow at the same time. I want to get closer, clinging to his waist, kissing at his shoulders like it's never enough. The heat between us roars, overwhelming but great. I wish to feel even more, so I desperately try to go deeper, to get closer to him.

I know that I'm close whenever my hips can't keep to a rhythm. My thighs shake to where I worry we may just fall over. Knowing this, I slip an arm around Quinton's waist to grasp him. For once, he's being about as vocal as me.

Hearing my name roll off his tongue in different moans and grunts is about the best thing I've heard in my life. It makes my body finally give into the orgasm that has been teasing me for some time now. My hips are still as I have to take one hand from Quinton to brace myself from falling straight to my knees and bringing him with me. Quinton isn't far behind, throwing his head back in drawn out ecstasy.

I continuously kiss his back, somehow still desperate to feel him. I'm a bit taken aback when he turns to wrap his arms around my neck and tug me in for a kiss. Simply that, a kiss. Almost a lazy one, because why the hell not?

“So, I’m not going to be a forever bottom, right?” I ask with a toothy grin that has him rolling his eyes.

“I suppose not,” he answers. “But we’re playing rock, paper, scissors next time.”

I laugh hard enough that my sides ache “Ok, we’ll play that next time.”

Quinton sighs as his arms wrap around my shoulders to hold me against his heaving chest. It’s funny that my legs felt like giving out before, but now they’re strong enough to hold me up, probably because the idea of leaving Quinton’s arms saddens me and I rather stay here. For a while we do. Simply stand there leaning against one another, enjoying the moment until the mess we made is enough to make Quinton grunt, “Move back, actually showering now sounds like a good idea.”

“You ruined the moment,” I say, only to earn myself a whack to the back of the head. “Ow! What is with the abuse straight after sex?” I get hit again. “Ow!”

I decide to keep my mouth shut, hoping to enjoy my shower rather than get beaten during it. It isn’t until after our showering is done and we’re lounging on Quinton’s bed, not doing anything other than resting beside one another, that I ask, “You aren’t mad that I outed us without your permission?”

“No,” he answers with a deep sigh. “Though it wasn’t your brightest idea.”

“Yeah, well, breaking up with me wasn’t your brightest idea either, so I guess we are both screw ups,” I reply, which actually makes Quinton tense beside me.

Silence follows afterwards, one that makes me worry that we’re going to land ourselves right back in an argument. However, Quinton is full of

surprises and I almost fall off the bed when he says, “Sorry.”

“What?” I shoot up to stare at Quinton, who refuses to look at me.

“You heard me. I’m not saying it again,” he hisses, eyes set on anything except me.

“You apologized,” I gasp, holding my hands against my cheeks. “Holy shit, who are you?”

Quinton finally looks at me with a sharp glare. “Keep this up and you’ll never hear such a thing again.”

“Implying that you are planning on doing something in the future that would require an apology?”

“I’ve changed my mind. You are going to be a forever bottom.”

I laugh and playfully kick at Quinton’s ankles with my foot. The action annoys him enough to turn on his side, ignoring me. I roll my eyes and lay beside him, wrapping both my arms and legs around Quinton. This makes him look back at me with the same glare that says he is getting fed up with me already.

“Tomorrow is going to be... exciting,” I say, thinking of all the news that will spread the word that I am not friends with Quinton but actually dating him. At least, I am assuming we’re together after he let me finally take his ass. Let me write this date down as an anniversary that we need to celebrate every year!

Quinton hums. “Exciting is putting it mildly.”

“Was I right though?” I ask, removing myself from Quinton to sit up and hover over him. He actually turns enough in order to look up at me with a questioning gaze.

“About why you broke up with me; was I right?” I elaborate.

Quinton’s lips form a thin line. His eyes stare aimlessly at a random place in his room. Sighing, he finally looks back at me with the answer practically written on his face, yet he still says, “Yes.”

He has more to say though, and he looks away to stare up at the ceiling as he explains, “You’re special, Aron. You know that, right?”

“If you’re calling me stupid—”

“I’m not,” he interrupts. “I mean it, seriously. I knew that if I told you all this, you would go all high and mighty, saying that we would get through it. You’d talk about how I shouldn’t feel bad for who I am, which I don’t anymore, thanks to you.”

I’m so not smiling from ear to ear, I swear.

“But,” His face scrunches up in anger. “I knew that the world would use me as a weapon to get to you. You would continue to fight against everyone, whether or not it is physical, and I didn’t want that. You have it hard enough and I was only making things worse. If… if I made you hate me, if I used your insecurities against you, you’d get angry and eventually move on, find yourself someone more suitable and have an easier life. I meant it when I said the worst choice I ever made was to be with you.”

I bite my lip, my eyes frantically looking about Quinton’s face to see if he was just being an ass again. However, a second later Quinton looks at me with a soft expression that actually makes my stomach drop. “Because I knew I would only drag you down.”

I don’t know how to respond, what to say as I hear Quinton lay out his feelings that he has been showing to me, always through his actions. Quinton doesn’t use words very often. He doesn’t throw his feelings around. He shows them with his actions and, even if they aren’t always the best, he goes all out and I just never saw them or appreciated them. Now, I

can see so clearly that we're both scared, worried, and not the most confident. We're just kids and sometimes we mess up. Actually, we mess up a lot.

"You should have talked about it with me," I say, unsure of what to add. What is there to say other than thank you or I love you because there are no words to express what I'm feeling right now.

"Oh, and do you always tell me about your problems?" He asks, making me frown since, no, I don't. I attempt to avoid conversations the same as Quinton does, and sometimes Quinton forced truths out of me.

"I guess we both have communication issues."

Quinton shrugs, not verbally admitting to it, but come on, we do.

Quinton pushes himself up to sit, and I do the same. I sit across from him, waiting patiently for him to speak. "Over the summer, all I heard and read about was how people were seeing you in a bad light because of me. I realized that you and I are quite similar."

"Huh?" I scratch my head. "How?"

"We ruin people's lives," he answers, making me want to defend him against himself, but he holds his hand up to inform me he isn't finished. "The media follows you around and nitpicks at everything you do, as well as those who are around you. The media found out about my father and so they nitpicked at me, as well as those who are around me."

I can't disagree with that. It was my fault Quinton's past came into light, but his past made the public dislike me. We brought discomfort to each other.

"I knew you'd try to play the good guy who didn't care about his image," Quinton says, making me wonder if that was meant as an insult or a compliment or both. "I knew you'd bring up coming out again. I figured the

safest thing to do was to break up. Your name would be cleared. We'd go our separate ways and your mistake would be forgotten."

"You aren't a mistake, Quinton," I grumble, not at all liking the way he thought of himself. It pisses me off more that he clearly knew how he felt. He knew before breaking up how much he cared about me he actually—that he loves me—yet he tried to throw his feelings away. I felt guilty for him having to say it, having to play everything off and pretend to be ok when he wasn't. I wouldn't have been able to do it.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, rubbing at my legs because the guilt is making me feel itchy. "I'm sorry you had to pretend like you didn't care. I'm sorry that I thought such cruel things about you because I didn't understand that you were doing this in hopes to help us, but let's promise not to do shit like this again, ok?" I look at him with hope, hope that he'll talk to me, that I'll talk to him and our hearts won't have to go through this kind of trouble a second time. "I doubt we'll always be able to talk things out. We'll probably get into fights again over our lack of communication, but never again throw your feelings away because you think it'll help me because it won't. It never will."

Quinton remains apathetic for a moment before smiling, smiling like a normal teenage boy that he is, regardless of what others may think, even me. It makes me think I am privileged to see such a sight and I wish to see it more, do whatever it takes to see it more. I get the feeling if he shows it to me every day, I'll still want to see it more.

Seeing his smile brings on my own, even more so when Quinton agrees softly, "Promise."

With that, I tackle the bastard who grunts and informs me that if I continue to be rough he is going to kick me out because, apparently, he's

sore. I laugh so hard I cry as I cackle evilly about how he now knows how I feel. Instead of getting cuddling time like I was kind of hoping for, he kicks me off the bed, grumbling about how he's going to sleep. I grumble back that he's a cold asshole with no feelings, but all I get in response is the soft sound of his breathing.

I watch curiously as he actually seems to have fallen asleep, and it makes me notice the small bags beneath his eyes. A small fraction of me feels guilty for having him fret so much that he has lost sleep while another relishes in his pain as I think, ha, that's what you get! I don't wish to wake him, though. He's clearly exhausted and, to be honest, so am I, but there is something else I want to do while I have the courage to do it.

Taking deep breaths, I grasp my phone so tightly my knuckles grow white as bone. It's such a simple thing, yet I feel like my world may just end if I do this. While I'm feeling courageous, I call my mother. Hearing the phone ring makes my fingers tap anxiously on the desk where I'm sitting. My eyes drift between Quinton's sleeping form and my fingers. When Mom finally answers, I don't even bother with a hello. I blurt out immediately, "I'm not going for Political Sciences or any shit like that in college."

"Oh... kay?" Mom answers, falling silent for a second before giggling. "What do you want to go for?"

Crap, didn't think this through. That isn't the point of this, though. I have to say this now. I have to decide about my life because it is my life. I may not have all the answers, but who ever does?

"I don't know," I answer honestly because I've never really thought about having options, but now I came out. I told everyone that I'm going to live my life the way I want it and not let others rule over me and I'm not! I'm

not doing it anymore. I'm the future king, but I'm allowed dreams. I'm allowed hobbies. I'm allowed to have a life.

"I don't know which school either," I admit, thinking how stupid I must sound. "But I'm going to pick. If I can't think of a major, then I'll go in as undecided, but I'm going to go for something that I want to go for!"

I nod as if she can see me, grip my phone tightly and wait patiently for a response. All right, I'm not patient in the least. The longer she takes to answer, the more I panic until I'm about ready to pass out in the chair. I even end up holding my breath and nearly choke on my saliva when Mom giggles. "I'm happy to hear that, Aron. You can go for whatever you want to go for. It's your future, and I'm proud that you're going to take hold of it."

What? Really?

"Right...ok...cool, that's really cool uh," I look over at Quinton, who I expect to be sleeping, but I find him looking right at me with this sort of smile that makes me stupidly smile back.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I sputter, "I will t-talk more about it later and uh, Quinton and I will l-look at colleges and stuff. I'll call you later. Love you, bye!"

Before Mom can reply, I hang up and power down my phone then stare at Quinton, who asks, "Who said I'm willing to help you pick a college?"

"I did!" I reply, stomping over to the bastard who, whether or not he admits to it, left an opening big enough for me in the bed. He even has the blankets peeled back for me to hop under, so he freaking invited me and he knows it.

"You're going to help, right?" I ask, suddenly feeling very nervous about it.

Quinton hums as he shakes his head. I am about to freak out when he suddenly pulls me into his chest. I flush and attempt to pull away until he says, “We’ll find you something.”

“Thanks,” I hum, burying my face in his chest.

“Aron,” Quinton calls, making me curiously look up at his proud smile. “You’re going to be a great king.”

And I can’t deny to myself or even Quinton that what he said is one of the best things I’ve ever heard in my life. His voice resonates within me to where it becomes hard to breathe. I can’t keep myself from smiling like some child who won a 10-pound bag of candy because no one has said that to me before. I’m the future king, but I never heard someone say I will be a great one. Hearing that from Quinton, from the person whose opinion truly matters to me, makes these feelings bubble up in my chest that words cannot possibly hope to explain.

All I can do is smile giddily back, bury my face into the crock of his neck as I chuckle, laugh, and maybe tear up a bit. I hold on to him like my very life depends on it because, for once, I actually feel that I’m not some bratty prince. I’m not some spoiled child. I’m growing. I’m learning. I’m becoming someone who wasn’t just born with but also has earned respect.

I’m going to be a great king. Part of me believes that maybe, just maybe, I will be.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I sit on my bed, staring at my phone that rests between my thighs. The sun creeps into my room from the window. The chirping birds tell me a new day has come. A day that is bound to be hell on earth thanks to my outburst yesterday. I wish I could be like Langley, laying in his bed on his back with his mouth wide-open letting out snores that could wake aliens in another galaxy.

I shut my phone off yesterday after talking with my mother. I knew the videos and pictures would be online before I could even blink, so I felt it best to shut my phone off entirely and block out the world as I spent time with Quinton. However, now reality is slamming back into me as the weight of my decisions makes my shoulders slump. Fear eats away at me and I reach for my phone, only to drop it like acid.

“Shit, shit, shit,” I hiss into my hands that are now covering my face. I know my parents are going to be calling, insisting I explain what happened.

Ok, so my mom knows about us but she didn’t know I planned on coming out so soon. I know I can’t hide in my room forever. With bated breath, I turn on my phone and begin searching the web.

As expected, I find articles written from the day before, basically a million of them saying the same thing; the prince is not only gay, but he’s also dating the son of a serial killer. If that can’t make headline news, then I don’t know what can. I’m suspecting every news company will have their story to tell.

Sighing, I toss my phone aside and fall back onto my bed to wonder how I’m going to make it through this mess. It isn’t as if my father can be dethroned simply because his son is bisexual. However, the notion will surely be brought up about me being dethroned. I can’t have children, which will probably be the principal argument. There is the choice of adoption or surrogacy, though people will argue against that. They take every opportunity they can get, regardless of how ridiculous the argument is. If I was judged before, then I don’t know what to say about what will happen to me now.

I don’t want to think about the drama. I don’t want to focus on it, so I roll to my side where I bury myself beneath the blankets until my alarm goes off for class. I grumble for a few moments before sitting up to see Langley’s mouth so far open in a yawn that I worry his lips may split.

“Parents try calling you yet?” Langley asks, his voice slightly slurred from sleep.

“Yeah, yesterday, but I had my phone off,” I answer, looking at my missed calls and wondering when they will try again. Oh wait, they are trying now. Langley chuckles upon seeing my phone vibrating madly.

“Better answer that,” he says, grabbing his uniform to take with him into the bathroom.

I really don’t want to answer. It’s not like I have anything to say, so why do I have to answer? Throwing my head back, I let out a loud groan before I finally cave and hold the phone slightly away from my ear in hopes that if mother screams I won’t lose my hearing.

“Hey,” I say into the line, grinding my teeth in worry.

“Don’t hey me after you ignored my calls all day yesterday!” Mom scolds. “Aron, the news, the internet, everything. Oh my god, why didn’t you talk to me about this? We could have had a press conference!”

Press conference? About my sexuality? No thanks!

“Or trained you some more on how to handle this because your admission was recorded. There are millions of views across multiple social media platforms!”

I whistle. “Dang, I’m famous.”

“This isn’t funny!” Mom growls. “It’s cute, but not funny.”

“Don’t call it cute.”

“Then don’t try to play it off as funny.”

“Sorry, you know I go to humor in awkward situations.”

“Yes, I am aware. Aron, the Corallines are already speaking with the court to hopefully deny you the right to the throne. Your actions are under such scrutiny that people will yell at you if you so much as blink funny!” Mom lets out a sigh that tells me how tired she already is and it hasn’t even been 24 hours.

“I know, I’m sorry,” I say. “But things were so shitty with Quinton that it sort of just happened. I’m so fucking tired of having to tiptoe around everything I do! I know I am meant to be king. I know I have

responsibilities and duties, but I deserve the right to be with someone I care about. That at least is something I deserve the right to, no matter what, isn't it?"

"Of course it is, sweetheart, but we have to handle things with care, everything. Don't get me wrong, I am very proud of you for sticking up for yourself, but lie low for a while, please? Don't make a scene at school and tell Quinton he's cute when he's flustered."

I chuckle. "I don't think he wants to hear that."

"Too bad. Know what? I'll call him later. If you two are serious, then we need to have a talk."

"Mom."

"I need to be the overprotective mother for a bit. Ok, so your father is having a press conference later today to address this. We will most likely have to call you out of school some time to talk to the press as well because they need the truth, not some stories made up by kids on the internet. I will call you later and you will call me if anything happens, right?" Mom asks.

"Yes, I understand. I'll talk to you later. Love you."

"Love you too," she replies before hanging up, leaving me sitting on my bed with the greatest desire to skip class. However, Mom said to lie low but lying low doesn't equal running away.

I stand, build up some courage and tell myself that I can't hide in my room all day. I have to face everyone and all the garbage they have to say. My dad does it all the time, and it doesn't even bother him anymore. I need to learn to become like that, to brush off the hurtful words and do what I think is best.

"Not skipping then?" Langley asks after coming out of the bathroom.

I shake my head. "No way in hell."

Langley gasps, throwing a dramatic hand over his heart. “You’re growing up so fast.”

“Shut it!” I warn, stomping into the bathroom to change.

Once done, Langley and I head out. As we’re walking through the dorms, people look our way. I hold my head high even when a few colorful words like fag and queer are whispered. I knew that would happen, but that doesn’t mean it makes it ok to hear. As Langley and I step out of the dorm, I nearly scream when a hand taps my shoulder. Langley howls with laughter as I pivot on my heel to stare wide-eyed at Quinton, who is looking at me like I’m an idiot. Wait, he’s always looking at me like that!

“Why so jumpy?” Quinton asks.

“Why are you here?” I ask, blushing more than should be allowed.

Quinton’s never come to walk with me in the mornings. Are we going to be a cheesy couple now? I don’t know if I’m mentally prepared for this change in dynamics.

“Because you just came out to the world. You think you can make it to class without getting messed with?” Quinton replies, helping me calm down. I don’t know what I would do if he actually acted lovey. Probably panic and take him to a hospital to be checked. Surely it isn’t him if he’s lovey.

“He’s right,” Langley says, nodding. “You’re already getting the stink eye from a bunch of people.”

I sigh. “This is going to be a long day.”

“A long year more like.”

The three of us walk together until Langley leaves to head for his own first period. I wave goodbye while Quinton waits patiently for me to follow him to class. As we’re walking, I peer down at his hand swinging next to

mine. I bite my lip before reaching out to grab it. His head snaps towards me like he thinks I'm insane before he asks, "What are you doing?"

"Holding hands?" I reply in a kind of question, kind of statement way.

"Why?"

"Because everyone knows we're dating now, so…" I shrug. "We can hold hands."

Quinton groans. "Gross."

Yet he doesn't pull his hand from mine. I laugh and shake my head at how he tries to act like he hates it, but he's the one who intertwined our fingers. Now we're being stared at by almost everyone. Their eyes linger on our hands and I can't help but wonder if as many people would be bothered if I wasn't the prince. I know the answer to that because we have multiple same-sex couples on campus. Some pick on them, but they don't get the same attention Quinton and I are receiving now. As I'm thinking this, two girls' race up to Quinton and I with their own hands together. Quinton and I stop to look down at one who seems to contemplate something.

"Hello," I say awkwardly to the two strangers.

I bring my hand up to wave when she and her girlfriend shout in unison, "We support you, Aron! Q for Queen!"

With that, they run off, leaving Quinton appalled and me in a fit of laughter. I laugh so hard I fall to the floor as I repeat, "Q for Queen!"

"Queen?" Quinton hisses, making me laugh harder until no sound comes out and I'm a gasping ball on the ground. "We both know which of us is more queen-like."

Quinton glares at me as I finally get back up and wipe the tears from my eyes. "Yeah, you!"

Quinton growls and stomps off to class, definitely not letting me hold his hand any longer. Not that I can, since I'm too busy wiping away my tears. I'm able to breathe properly by the time we arrive at class. Any chatter in the room stops the moment Quinton and I enter. All eyes are on us, which reminds me too much of a horror movie. The air is tense, even more so when I reach for Quinton's hand as he does the same. Our hands lock and we make our wayside by side to our desk. However, before we can sit, Trenton comes storming towards us.

"Befriending that freak is one thing, but dating him?" Trenton scowls. "That's disgusting."

The room breaks out with chatter again, though now it's all focused on us. I can hear a few things ranging from Trenton is going too far to Trenton is right. It's odd that I actually feel better hearing that. Some people agree with Trenton while others don't. It makes me think that there are some people out there who are not only ok with my decision but also accepting and excited about it, like those two girls earlier.

"You know you won't be king, right?" Trenton asks, actually reaching out to shove me.

I stumble back. Quinton is ready to likely teach the bastard a lesson. However, I hold him back and shake my head. My mother said to hang low for a while and I plan to do that. I think of my father again and how he handles situations like this. My dad has never physically confronted someone. I want to do that too. I don't want to rely on my fists all the time to fix a problem. Like my father, I need to find a solution to everything without violence, especially now. People are already questioning my right to rule. They see me as immature, and honestly; I know I am. I know that

I’m young and not mature enough to rule, but who is at my age? I will learn eventually and I’m going to start now.

I take a step towards Trenton, press out my uniform as I take a deep breath and reply with a voice that I hope is calm, “I’m sorry you think that way, Trenton. I may not be the best choice for king at the moment, but I will be one day. When that day comes, you’ll realize it too.”

“Like we’d ever let a fag be king,” Trenton growls.

I smile and look back at Quinton, who appears ready to blow. However, when he sees me smile, he simmers down until his shoulders relax. I look away and turn back to Trenton to reply, “That day will come too.”

Trenton curses me some more before going back to his desk at the sound of the bell. I let out a long sigh and take my seat next to Quinton.

“I should have hit him,” I grumble.

“You should have,” Quinton agrees, then smirks. “But I’m glad you didn’t.”

“It was right not to, right?” I’m hoping my decision was a good one, and when Quinton nods, it relieves me. “I’m not good at solving things with words. My dad is really good at it.”

“You’re learning, that’s what matters.”

I nod, feeling much better after hearing Quinton say that. It seems I really need the bastard because he makes me feel like I can do this. I can be a good king. I just need practice and one day I hope to be as good as my father. I don’t know how long that may take, but I’m willing to work at it, so long as I know Quinton will be with me the whole time.

Our day goes on, and though it is full of people's trash talking me around every corner, there are just as many who either don’t care or are more than

accepting of it. I find it strange how during lunch a group of students actually shout towards Quinton and me, “Q for Queen!”

Apparently, it’s a new trend. Quinton hates it; hates it even more that it’s trending online, and there are articles talking about how people would love for Quinton to be the next “queen.” I love it too because seeing Quinton’s face every time someone shouts makes me howl with laughter. Langley loves the phrase too. He cries with me at lunch about it, laughing until our sides ache. Ariel tries to calm Quinton before he kills us. To make matters worse for Quinton, Autumn messages him all sorts of taunts about his new status. He ends up turning his phone off while grumbling about disemboweling her. I inform her of her oncoming death.

Everything goes smoother than I thought. I admit the harsh words and teasing are annoying. Sometimes Quinton has to remind me not to pummel anyone who dare glare at us. However, people smile at us too, holding up their thumbs in approval or waving enthusiastically. There are even a few students who have bought rainbow attire to attach on their bags or wrists. There are supporters, even at our school. Sure, there are many people against my decision, but knowing that I have people standing behind me, total strangers who will help me, makes this sort of happiness bubble in my chest that no words can describe. It makes me think that Quinton and I can get through this. We have so much help, how couldn’t we?

I search up articles once again and find there to be some applauding me for my decision. Even Quinton’s curiosity eats at him enough to read some with me.

“I guess we aren’t totally fucked.” I laugh, looking at Quinton, who seems to be as relieved as me.

“Have you heard from your dad?” Quinton asks. I told him Mom called me earlier.

“No. Apparently, he is having a press conference. Mom said she’d call me to talk to the press later.”

Quinton hums. “That would be best.”

“Do you think he’s mad?” I ask, biting my lip while thinking that my dad hasn’t called me to talk at all. Mom called, but she already knew while Dad, he learned about my sexuality through the news. I wanted to tell him myself, but things happened and now I’m not so sure how he feels.

“Your dad, mad at you?” Quinton scoffs. “That will be the day.”

“He may spoil me, but this is different. Not everyone handles their son coming out very well,” I mumble, trying to tell myself that my dad loves me no matter what. At least I hope he does.

“He is most likely shocked, but he’ll come around,” Quinton reassures me, making me smile at him in a way that has him questioning me. “What?”

“You have these moments where I forget how demonic you are.”

Then he changes my mind by stealing my pop and chugging it. I shout and frantically reach for the beverage while Ariel and Langley laugh.

“You don’t even like pop!” I cry.

“Exactly,” he burps, tossing the empty bottle to me as he grimaces. “It’s worth it though.”

“I hate you!”

Except Langley is a bastard as well as he holds up his phone to play my voice saying, I love you too, asshole. He rewinds it and repeats it as he says on his own, “I don’t think you do.”

“Oh fuck you, he doesn’t hate me either! Why don’t you play his voice on repeat?”

Langley never does. The rest of lunch I hear my admission repeatedly. It makes my cheeks heat up to where I press Quinton’s cold bottle of tea against my face to cool my face. It doesn’t help until Langley and Ariel leave, finally freeing me from their torment.

I know I am meant to be called out later today because my mother told me I probably would, so I’m not surprised to hear my name being called on the intercom. I get up and wave to Quinton, who says, “Have fun.”

I flip him off, get scolded by the teacher, then disappear out the door to head for the office. I am shocked to see both my parents there, looking back at me.

“What are you doing at my school?” I ask, immediately imagining my mother doing all sorts of embarrassing things.

“I told you we were going to have you talk to the press. Your father decided to do it all at once so we came down,” Mom answers, rushing over to hug me. I am smothered by affection for a good five minutes before I remind her, as I always do, that breathing is important.

Once she releases me, I look at my dad’s blank expression. He doesn’t give me a hug like he normally does. Instead, he says, “Let’s get this over with.”

Dad brushes past me and into the hall. Mom huffs, then looks at me and says, “He really isn’t bothered. We talked about this—”

“It’s fine,” I interrupt her, scratching at the back of my neck. “I get it.”

“No, Aron,” Mom coo’s but before she can lecture me, I follow dad. I don’t have a clue where we’re going or if they have a script for me to

follow. Our walk is silent to the limousine. I make sure Mom gets in before me because I get the feeling Dad doesn't want to talk to me.

"Scott," Mom hisses, slapping my dad on the knee to get his attention. He looks at her with a questioning gaze, which only makes her slap him a second time, but harder. "Talk to your son. You are worrying him."

I keep quiet, my eyes downcast as I listen to my father clear his throat. Silence follows for a minute or so before he sighs, "I'm not...you and Quinton being together doesn't bother me."

"Seems like it does," I mumble.

I look up to see Dad shake his head. He leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees as he explains, "What bothers me is that you didn't tell us and just came out in front of the whole school. I'm sorry, Aron, but we just can't do that. We are scrutinized because of who we are and you can't act childishly in order to fix your problems."

"I know. I just didn't know how else to fix things with Quinton."

"I'm sorry you had to go through all that, and I'm sorry for what you are going to have to go through in the future. You understand that now you're so exposed that people are going to do everything they can to hurt you. The Corallines are already jumping on the bandwagon of getting you thrown out. They're saying that Willow can have an heir and, honestly, people right now would probably prefer a queen over." He stops, but I got the message.

They rather have a queen than a fag. I know that, Dad knows it too.

He sighs, "Quinton has to be prepared too. People are going to judge him just as much as they judge you, especially if this relationship of yours lasts."

"I actually thought he couldn't handle it earlier, which was why we were having problems, but he gets angrier hearing what others have to say about

me than himself so I think he's good," I say, recalling how the bastard dared break us up in hopes to help me. I both love and hate him for that. I can't really stay mad at him because, if I were in his position, I probably would have done the same.

Mom releases a relieved sigh. She grasps my hand and says, "See? Nothing to worry about. We're behind you and so many others are, too. This world is changing bit by bit and now you are helping it move along even more."

That makes me sigh too. Nerves suddenly settle in because we're close to where we hold our usual press conferences. News vans and reporters are scattered around. My shoulders stiffen and my heart goes into overload. I'm on the verge of vomiting when Dad says, "Here we go."

Heaving a breath, I push open the limousine door to be bombarded with questions and pictures. Security keeps everyone at a safe distance. I follow my parents inside where we go to a backroom crowded with several people that I recognize. Some are from the court, some from those in charge of writing our scripts, and even a few makeup artists that I try to run from. Having on makeup makes me think about not touching my face so much that I end up touching my face even more!

"Come now, Aron, appreciate the perks. Let them do your makeup!" Mom giggles, enjoying getting her cheeks flushed.

"No way," I hiss, swatting away the make-up artists who eventually back off. "I'm eighteen, so of course I'm going to have acne! They'll get over it."

Mom pouts but says no more, seeing as Dad is now showing me a script I read over. I grimace, not liking the idea of sounding like a robot. The script doesn't sound like me at all, though I suppose no one knows that except for those who actually know me.

“You know I hate these,” I sigh, looking at him with a frown.

“I know, but we need you to lie low and spouting from your wit will not help,” Dad laughs.

“You sound like Quinton.” I recall him mentioning my wit.

Dad rolls his eyes and asks if I’m feeling ok or if I’m too nervous to do this. I shake my head and take a deep breath as I follow Dad to the podium in the courtroom where the news companies and reporters are waiting. I stand on the right side of my father while my mother is on the left.

I’m always shocked to see my mother in public because her face suddenly becomes serious. She says that when she’s with me; she is nothing more than a mother, but in public she is the queen and she will act as such. I find it funny and admirable because I can’t imagine ever being able to pull off what she can. I guess I can always make Quinton do it. After all, he is meant to be the Queen. I snicker at my own thoughts before realizing where we are.

Dad speaks about exactly what I expect him to. He informs the press that I am indeed in a romantic relationship with Quinton. He speaks of how Quinton has already been to our home. We have all learned about him and he asks that everyone respect Quinton’s privacy and our own. He talks about how the Corallines are doing what they think is right and he will not hold that against them. I want to roll my eyes but refrain from doing so. He speaks about how I am still young and still learning before calling me up to talk.

I nod and exchange places with my father although my legs feel like jello. Once at the podium, I feel the urge to vomit again. Grasping the podium, I narrowly prevent myself from falling over. Seeing all these eyes staring up at me makes me dizzy. I’ve been to conferences before, but I’ve never had

all the attention on myself. My mouth grows dryer than a desert and I look to both my parents, who smile reassuringly at me.

I nod to them both, take a breath and sputter out, “H-Hello.”

What a great start! I shake my head and try again in a more clear voice. “Hello.”

Still a bit shaky, but people are watching and waiting for me to continue.

“So you all know videos as well as pictures have been circulating about Quinton and I.” I fumble with my script until I have to sit the pages against the podium because I can’t stop shaking. “What you have read is true. Quinton and I are in a romantic relationship and have been for a few months.”

I look at the script that has all this bullshit written about growing as a person and learning from my mistakes, so on and so forth. That isn’t quite what I want to say. As I flip through the pages, I realize I don’t want to say any of it because the point of this conference is to inform the public of the truth, not a bunch of lies.

I look at my dad, who gives me a confused glance when I shut the packet. He mouths to me ‘what are you doing’ but I ignore him to say with more confidence than I ever thought I had in me; “I’m not going to apologize for dating Quinton, if that is what you wish to hear. I will not apologize for loving someone. I know not all of you agree with whom I wish to be with and that is your belief that I will not tell you is right or wrong. We have the right to choose what we believe in, just as I have the right to choose who I wish to be with and that person is Quinton. I understand why so many people seem to fear him. They are protecting their children since they do not understand, but I understand him. My family understands him and we know him not as the son of a serial killer, but Quinton Underwood; a bit

distant and cold, but also a smart and loyal boy who will never be like his father. I hope one day that you all come to realize that for yourselves."

The reporters glance at one another as if they are waiting to see if someone is going to interrupt me. When no one does, I take that as a sign to keep going with no idea of really where I'm leading this to, "I know I'm still immature. I'm young and I tend to solve problems with my fists, as I'm sure you've read."

A few chuckles flow through the room.

"I am not saying that I was right to do that. Actually, I know I wasn't, and it is why I haven't gotten into fights since. I'm learning. I'm growing and I know it's only bit by bit, but isn't that the point? To grow and learn, always, and to never think that I'm the best because once you think of yourself as the best, you can never do any better. As your future king, I think I am meant to always question myself and push myself to do even better because I have to grow and learn from my mistakes. I am working on that now, trying to find myself and how to better myself not only for me but also for everyone. I know I have a lot of responsibility and I am not going to run from it, ever."

I nod, more to myself than the crowd. I know now that running from my life is wrong, accepting it and working with it is right.

"Right now, you all see me as incompetent, so do I. You will probably continue to see me as incompetent for years to come, so will I. However, I will grow, become better until one day comes when you think, 'wow, he's grown, he's a king,' and so will I. I don't know when that day will be, certainly not today or tomorrow, or maybe even ten years from now, but I will work hard and do better in order to reach that goal. I hope that you all

will help and follow me because a king does nothing on his own. He needs help from all of you. I need help from all of you."

I look about the room full of what seems to be shocked reporters. Whispers erupt throughout the room and it makes my hands shake. I have to grasp them into fists atop the podium, hoping to keep a straight face. I am beginning to think I will have to request lessons from Quinton on how to do that famous poker face of his, as I imagine I am red as a tomato right now.

Then a single reporter stands to clap so loudly that it echoes off the walls of the courtroom. I feel my legs are about to give out as slowly, almost one by one, others stand until about half of the room is standing and clapping too. Questions are thrown at me, ranging from good and bad, that I ignore in order to look at my parents, who are clapping and smiling back at me.

Dad pats me on the back. "Maybe your wit comes in handy."

I laugh and look out at the crowd that I may not have completely won over, but I am working on it. Like I said, I will grow. I will become better until that day comes when I can say with confidence; I am your king.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I head back to my dorm after the conference, passing by staring students. It isn't like people haven't stared at me before. In fact, staring seems to be mostly everyone's favorite thing to do. However, now it's different. They whisper behind my back, so I turn to look their way. When they see me looking, the students jump and scurry off in another direction. It's a normal thing, but it feels different. Probably because I know what they are talking about is now different than what it used to be. Suddenly, I don't like the idea of being out on my own, so I basically jog back to my dorm where I find Langley.

"I see it went well," Langley says, swinging the remote around in his hand. "Saw it on TV already."

"I can't imagine going to class after everyone has seen it." I groan, absolutely hating the idea of Langley having heard the speech. He's never going to let me live it down. It's embarrassing and I already regret just

spewing whatever came to my mind. I feel nervous, worried and stressed. I said all that, yet I have no clue if I can actually do any of it. Can I become a good king someday? Who knows!

I fall onto my bed, totally drained. Langley must know it too, because he remains relatively quiet the rest of the evening. I receive a few messages from Quinton, none of them hinting at the fact that he saw the speech. He asks how things went and it makes me smile stupidly into my pillow. Freaking getting excited over a dumb text message. Pathetic teenager feelings, stupid!

I get myself a shower earlier than usual, change, and pass out the moment I fall back onto my bed. After the day I had, I'm surprised I stayed up as long as I did. It felt so long, as if it were three days bunched into one. So much happened, so much changed that I haven't gotten a real chance to grasp it all. I feel exhausted, even my body does, and it's not like I did any physical activities. Funny how being mentally exhausted can affect your physical self as well.

I don't wake until the next day when my alarm blares. Not expecting to be woken up so suddenly, I fell right out of bed, earning myself laughter from Langley, who says that he loves having comedy first thing in the morning. I grumble my way through getting ready and curse Langley for being an asshole.

Once again, I am reminded about how things have changed. Waking before I would head to class feeling light as a feather. Now there is a sense of dread and worry, though it isn't necessarily a bad feeling as I know I can handle what will be thrown at me, or rather, has been thrown at me. I guess I know things are different and I know it will take time to adjust to it all. For now, I nervously walk out the door.

I planned on getting my revenge on Langley for calling me comedy during our walk, but when Langley and I see Quinton waiting outside my dorm again, Langley grimaces. “While you guys have a moment, I’m going to leave.”

He runs off, saying hello to Quinton before disappearing down the sidewalk. Shaking my head, I walk over to Quinton, who smirks at me and says, “What a speech you gave yesterday.”

Shit, he saw it.

“Not going to apologize for who you love? How sweet.”

“S-Shut up!” I growl, pointing accusingly at him. It’s not very threatening as my hand is shaking. “I was just saying what I thought I should! You freaking... ugh, do you know how hard it was to go up there and say that?”

I claw at my hair furiously. It was so hard! I can’t believe I said all that crap. It’s making my skin crawl! I am disgustingly cheesy. Why did I say that? I had a script for a reason!

“I never said it was bad.” Quinton steps towards me. I grumble until he rests his arms on my shoulders, bringing me in close so he can breathe the next words against my lips. “It really was great, Aron. I mean it.”

I still don’t believe him. Not to mention my mind is going haywire, seeing as we are in public and he’s being physical. The sirens are going off in my head as I can’t help but think, holy shit, who is he? Because there is no way this is Quinton! Is this a trap? Does he have a pie hidden under his blazer that he is going to shove in my face? Maybe a water bottle that he will dump on my head? I don’t know, but my spidey senses are tingling.

“You’re making fun of me,” I say, looking around us at those who are watching.

I glare at the students watching us, hoping to make them stop. They do and run off, but it makes me wonder who would stand around and freaking stare at people like that? What do they get out of watching Quinton and me? Amusement? Freaking weirdos!

My wild thoughts are put on hold when Quinton buries his fingers into my hair to bring me in for a kiss, a short and sweet one that makes my toes curl. The kiss is even more warming because we're in public. We kissed. In public. I am both embarrassed and happy about it. Makes me wonder if Quinton will actually be public with us because it seems he is enjoying the blush he put on my face. I always imagined he wouldn't be lovey, but perhaps he would be, simply to mess with me because he's an ass like that.

Once we pull apart, Quinton retreats and shrugs nonchalantly. "If that's what you want to believe, so be it."

"Oh, come on," I whine, following him down the sidewalk, still half shocked he wasn't trying to prank me a second ago. "You're supposed to say it again so I can bask in this victory."

Quinton rolls his eyes. "I'm not repeating it."

"Will you repeat something else for me, then?" I ask, smiling at his glare. He knows he will not like what I'm about to ask and it's kind of sad he knows me so well.

"Tell me you love me again?" I request, hardly above a whisper.

Quinton stares at me like I asked him to do the most difficult thing in the world. Perhaps I have because it took him some time to tell me. I don't know if I could say it just because he asked me to. I don't really plan on saying it often or even asking him to, but right now. I kind of need to hear those words. With what's been going on, what will go on later, everything that is coming our way, hearing him say it once more will help somehow.

Why is that? Why do we think that way? Why do we think that hearing someone say they love us will make things better? They're just words, yet they hold more meaning than anyone can imagine. Maybe he knows that or at least understands. Once again, I am reminded that like me, Quinton is a teenager who gets flustered like others. It simply takes a bit more to do it. Beneath his eyes rests the lightest shade of pink known to man, yet it's so easy for me to see.

Sighing, he looks away in order to whisper, "I love you."

I smile from ear to ear as I brush my shoulder against his in a playful push. "I love you too."

Now we're both blushing, mine much darker than his, but it's there and the thought of that makes me smile the entire way to class. Even if the walk is silent, it's a comfortable one.

I am kind of glad he has trouble saying it, makes me feel like he actually means it. I know I will always have trouble admitting to it too. I don't know, saying you love someone feels so personal, almost sacred. I don't want to throw such strong words around like they're nothing. They are meant to mean a lot. Between Quinton and me, I think they're even more powerful.

Throughout our day, we are met by different opinions from students. I laugh when I actually see people walking around with rainbow pins. They look at Quinton and I proudly and shout things like, Q for Queen and we're supporting you! I look at Quinton, who grumbles about the first part but seems pleased to hear the second.

However, there are assholes who are clearly not as ok with our relationship. I discover that whenever I open my locker to find, someone has actually pissed on my belongings. Even Quinton finds notes on his

locker reading fag or freak. It bothers me as much as it bothers Quinton. Most of the time, I am aware of who did it. There's this urge to pull a power play and kick them all out of school, but I don't do it.

I'm proud of myself for not overreacting. There's certainly a desire to do so. The anger in me builds up as I eye everyone around me, some seeming happy to see me being taunted, while others aren't. I remind myself that physical confrontations aren't the answer. I promised I would learn and grow and I plan to keep that promise. I take a deep breath and inform the school of what happened without causing a scene. I will take the so-called righteous path and, afterwards, I kind of feel good about it.

Even Quinton appears surprised to find me coming back to him without bruised knuckles. He looks me up and down, like he's expecting to find some sign of a fight. When he doesn't, he smirks, and I don't need to hear him say he's proud of me. I can tell just by looking at him, which makes me feel even better about my decision.

Things aren't all bad, though. Whenever I see someone walk by us and smile or shout their support, it all feels ok, like I can make it through this. There are people backing me up, and isn't that what matters?

I feel happy that we have as much support as we do and it makes up for all the bad being thrown our way. Even Quinton doesn't mind the attention, who brushes off basically everything said to him. I end up laughing whenever a student says something to him and Quinton walks past him like he's nothing. The guy ends up standing there with his jaw hanging open in shock that he was so openly ignored.

"What?" Quinton asks.

"Did you see his face?" I point back at the guy. Quinton looks back too late. The jerk has recovered and stormed off.

“No,” Quinton replies with a shrug. “Why?”

“It was great!” I laugh, holding onto my side. Quinton shakes his head at me. “So my mom wants you to come over for Christmas break.”

Quinton cocks a brow but isn’t bothered by the request.

“We aren’t even that far into school and she’s mentioning Christmas break?” Quinton asks, smirking. “What a mommy’s boy you are.”

“So what? Like you don’t love my mother too!”

“I’ll come,” Quinton says. “I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“You could have left that last part out, y’know. It makes it sound like you actually don’t want to come.”

I’m sure my mother will be pleased, though. If Quinton comes along, I will probably head home as soon as break starts. I felt nervous about the idea of spending Christmas with Quinton though, seeing as it’s never happened before. I shake those thoughts from my head since, like Quinton said; it’s not even far into the school year, so break is way off.

Before the day ends, we are informed that we will be pulled out of class to talk about our future plans. I grimace as I think about that and look at the always un-bothered Quinton. Thanks to our last names, Quinton is called before me and returns shortly after. I’m not surprised. He’s already aware of what major he wishes to go for, but he hasn’t talked to me if he has chosen a school yet. Before I can ask, my name is called.

Off I go, grumbling to myself about how I basically do not know what to say to the guidance counselor. I’ve barely talked to my mother about school, so what am I meant to say to Mr. Gary? I’ve now realized that I have a choice and that I can make it, but that will not fly with the guidance counselor. They expect us to have a clue what we are planning to do with

our lives. Of course, I am meant to rule, but still, I should know what major I want to go for. This is so complicated.

I walk into Mr. Gary's office, who looks up from his desk with a smile. "Your Highness, come in!"

I sit before his desk, squirm in the seat, trying to get comfortable. I fail miserably and end up sitting there feeling like I'm on pins and needles.

"First, I would like to say I heard the speech you gave the other day," he says, smiling proudly. "That was very impressive. You are certainly growing already."

"Thank you." I scratch nervously at my legs.

"The news is loving you again, though the Corallines are certainly causing a scene, aren't they?" Mr. Gary holds up his phone. There's an article headline about my speech, though the oncoming battle against the Coralline's seem to be the focus of everything else. They've already got people backing them up, and I'm not at all surprised. They are starting their own movement, whether it holds is something we'll discover in the future.

I sigh and nod. "Well, they are taking their chances. Besides, if they didn't start it, someone else surely will."

"Very true." Mr. Gary hums then sets aside his phone in order to look at me.

"I'm sure you know why you're here," he says, clasping his hands together as he looks at me across the desk. "Do you have plans for after you graduate?"

"Kind of," I answer, frowning a bit when I see his smile fall slightly. "Uh, I do plan to go to college, probably as undecided. I don't know what for or where."

“Have you talked to your parents about this? Graduation may seem far away, but you have to send out applications for schools now.”

“I know, I know.” I sigh. “It was kind of a recent decision. I talked to my mother and I’ve been talking with Quinton.”

“I hope you make a decision soon,” Mr. Gary says and suggests I look at a few of the college pamphlets he has. I take them all and we discuss a few different things before he lets me leave.

I let out a heavy sigh as I exit his office, hands full of college pamphlets, feeling even more unsure about college than before. There are so many. How am I meant to choose? Honestly, I have considered just going to the college closest to home. I don’t feel like going far away or staying in a dorm, but if I gave that as my reason to go there, my parents would probably flip. College seems like a whole other world. After all the shit going on, I don’t know if I can handle it.

I head back to class and take my seat next to Quinton. He nods at me to show he saw me return and probably doesn’t expect me to talk to him. Well, tough shit. I knock him with my shoulder to get his attention and he looks at me and mouths, ‘what?’

“What did you say to Mr. Gary?” I ask, looking at our teacher who didn’t hear me, judging by the fact he hasn’t turned around to scold me yet.

“That I’m going for Biomedical Science. Why?” Quinton replies, glancing at our teacher and back to me with an expression that says how much he dislikes talking in class.

“Where?” I ask.

“Hensley University.”

My eyes shoot wide open. “You found a school and didn’t tell me?”

“I’ve found multiple ones and applied, yes, but I haven’t received an acceptance letter yet,” Quinton answers, tapping his pencil impatiently, probably because he’s missing out on notes. “Can’t we talk about this after class?”

I groan but agree. Thankfully, lunch is next, which means we can talk. I might snoop on Ariel and Langley too, to see what their plans are. I’ve actually never talked to Langley about his plans, so when I hear the boy answer me so confidently at lunch, I’m shocked.

“I’m going for Business Management,” Langley says through his bites of food. “My dad is going to give me the family business. I’ve been raised on how to work it, but it would be easier to get a degree. Besides, I kind of like bossing people around!”

I roll my eyes at his reasoning then look at Ariel, who chirps, “I’m going for Fashion Marketing. My mother owns a line of stores and though I rather design the clothes, I felt that getting a marketing degree would help in case that ever fell through.”

I stare at the two of them, then look at Quinton and groan, “Why am I the only clueless one?”

“Because you never thought you had an option until recently,” Ariel replies, giggling. “No worries, Aron. You can go in as undecided.”

“But I don’t want to do that. It’s going to look pathetic!” I whine, throwing my arms through the air madly. Quinton leans away from me to avoid being hit and grimaces at my childish behavior. “I always assumed I’d go into something like Political Sciences but I really don’t want to.”

“Why not something like business or, oh, economics? You shouldn’t be total shit at that,” Langley laughs, earning himself a slap to the back of the head from Ariel. He nearly coughs up his sandwich.

“You never know. You may take some classes and find that you like Political Sciences. What matters is that you choose it of your own accord, not because you feel you have to,” Ariel says, pointing at me with her fork.

“You’re right,” I sigh, but bury my face in my hands. I rub at my cheeks with the palm of my hands. “Something like a business degree wouldn’t be so bad.”

“Oh no, I may have to put up with you in college, too?” Langley feigns disgust.

“Who even said we’d go to the same school?!” I shout, pointing accusingly at him. He nods, then dubs our conversation is not important since he goes about eating his lunch without another word.

“What do you think?” I ask Quinton.

“About you going into business?” Quinton sits quietly for a moment, thinking it over seriously, which makes me grin. I don’t know, it’s kind of nice knowing that he’s actually considering something seriously for me. Eventually, he replies simply, “If that’s what you want to do, do it.”

“Will you research it some with me?” I request. If there’s any person who can help me pick out a good college, it’s Quinton.

Not to mention if he helps me out, we can discuss college more. It’s not like I expect us to go to the same school, but I would like to at least talk about college, what our plans are, what we want to do, where we want to go, and how we plan to do it, like, is Quinton going to move? Will he get a job? What are his plans?

I bite my lip at how silly I feel because, damn, it’s like we’re a couple. I mean, we are, but thinking like this makes me feel like we are. Does that make sense? It doesn’t; I know it doesn’t.

When Quinton finally nods, my sheepish smile is replaced with a real one. I feel excited at the idea of us talking about our future plans together. It makes me feel like we've grown somehow. We're going from boys to men? I don't know, but it makes my chest warm.

"Cool! So, uh, how many schools have you applied to?" I inquire.

"Three," Quinton answers, pushing his tray away after he's finished. He places his elbow against the table and leans forward to rest his head atop his fist. "It wasn't too long ago, so I don't expect letters for a while."

I snicker. "Letters, meaning you think you'll get accepted into all of them."

"They send letters if you aren't accepted, either."

"Like they won't accept you."

Quinton smirks that cocky smirk of his that makes my blood boil to this day and says, "True."

"Which one do you want to go to most, though? Hensley University?" I ask, recalling that's the one he mentioned earlier. I actually know Hensley University. It's not too far from my home, a little over an hour's drive. It's one of the biggest named universities and I'm actually not surprised he applied to it.

"Yes," Quinton replies. "It has the best science department and Greenly University is where I wish to do my grad school work, which isn't far from it."

I know Greenly too, and I end up staring at Quinton in disbelief that he's thought so far ahead that he even knows where he wants to go for grad school. I don't even know what college I want to go to yet! Definitely not Hensley. I know you need to be basically perfect to get in there. Though my

grades have improved, I'm not good enough to get in on my own. As the prince? Yes, but with my own power? Not so much.

"I don't want to go too far from home, I know that," I say, slightly surprising myself. Here I am at a public school, away from home, but the thought of going to college and being away from home frightens me. Go figure.

Maybe because I hear all the shit college students go through and fear it. I will probably end up going half mad and my mother will lock me in the castle to protect me from the world. I laugh at my own thoughts.

"There are plenty of schools near your home," Quinton says, breaking me from my thoughts. "It is the capital, after all."

I nod, already recalling a few colleges nearby that I could easily get to. "Yeah, true. If you get into Hensley, I could pester you a bunch, too."

"Don't." He narrows his eyes and I feel like I've been issued a challenge.

"I so will," I snicker, reaching for his hand. Quinton gazes at our connection that still seems to shock the both of us.. "It's cool though, that you have your future planned out so well."

"We'll work on yours too, but I suppose," Quinton intertwines our fingers slowly, like he isn't used to the action or is still unsure of whether it's ok to do. I feel the same, enjoying the connection but also kind of embarrassed by it. The hand lock warms me because here we are, sitting in the cafeteria in front of everyone, holding hands like a normal couple, and I would be lying if I said it didn't feel good. Quinton offers a smile, a smile that belongs to me, a smile that informs me what he says next has more meaning than one, and speaks, "Not all things go according to plan."

"They sure don't." I laugh, figuring it's us he really means, our relationship.

We didn’t plan for this to happen. It just did. We met in a shitty way our sophomore year, fighting over a chair because of my massive ego. Somehow we went from worst enemies to friends to dating. Planned? Surely not, seeing as I doubt either of us even imagined being friends by now, let alone dating. I had ‘planned’ to get myself a nice girlfriend and be ‘normal.’ Obviously I did not get a girlfriend, but…

Looking at the connection between Quinton and I, the warmth of our hands makes me think this feels normal. Across the table, Ariel and Langley laugh and talk about something random as they eat their lunch with us, and I think this feels normal. My head turns from side to side, examining the lunch room full of my fellow students, some most likely thinking bad things about me, some teasing me, and some not really caring, and I think this feels normal.

Normal, it’s what I wanted, and I got it, just not in the way I had planned. Just like nothing Quinton, Autumn, Ariel, Langley or I plan will be definite. Nothing is set in stone.

Here the four of us are, talking of our future over lunch, when a month from now we could talk of different ones entirely. It doesn’t make it bad or good. It doesn’t matter how much we plan or what we hope to do because when we finally think we have things settled, life throws a rock at us and unsettles it all. It’s not about having everything planned; it’s about getting back up when those plans have failed.

I have no clue what my future holds for me. Quinton does not know what his future holds for him. We have no clue if our futures will even involve one another. There is no guarantee that we will stay together. We’re both young, only just beginning our lives that could either go in the way we wish it to be, or more realistically be a huge train wreck we choose to fix rather

than cry over. I know my decisions up to now have not been the best, nor will I make the best of them in the future. I will make mistakes. I will get lost, however, I will stand tall and fix those mistakes and find my way back.

Quinton and I have so much more to do, even if it isn't with each other. Who knows, we may break up again, we may stay broken up, but we won't know that until it gets here. As a prince, as the future king, there is a lot in store for me. Ten, twenty, thirty years down the road and I will still battle for my position against not only the Corallines but also others who only wish to bring me down. I will still fight a political war no matter what, and the answer to my problem is simple; fight through it, persist, and I will make it through, even if it's not in the way I expect.

I will keep my promises regardless of what life throws at me. I will learn. I will grow. I will become the great king that everyone wants and needs. It will take time. I will most likely lose my way here or there, but I will push through it because that is what I am meant to do. I hope Quinton is with me, but as he said, not all things go according to plan. The only thing we know for sure is that life goes on.

Our story doesn't end here. Our story will never end. I've learned a lot in such a short amount of time. However, if there is one thing I have learned for sure throughout this adventure, that I hope to keep with me forever, it is to always speak the truth even if it is tough because lying, hiding, and keeping secrets never leads to a happy ending.

CHECK OUT THE FOLLOWING SHORT STORIES AND VOLUME THREE FOR THE CONTINUATION OF QUINTON AND ARON'S STORY.

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VALENTINE'S DAY DANCE EXTRA

Takes Place During Quinton & Aron's Senior Year of High School

"What do you mean, you're not going?"

"I mean we're not going," I repeat, for I swear the millionth time, while looking up at the glare Ariel's sending me.

Hey, what's the big deal? It's not that crazy! She looks like I stole her lunch money with that pout and the way her arms are crossed over her chest.

"How can you not go? It's the Valentine's Day dance!" Ariel hollers, voice echoing in the cafeteria, before dropping to the seat beside Langley, who is too busy stuffing his face to care about our conversation. Ariel shifts her attention to Quinton beside me, as if she expects him to back her up.

Yeah, right, like that'll happen!

Quinton's more likely to break out into dance before actually asking me to a dance. Even if he did, I would say no anyway, because why would we go to the dance? What would we even do? Stand in the corner awkwardly

looking like giant penguins? Because he won't dance and I'm fine with making myself look like a fool. I do it daily, in fact, but dancing with Satan himself? Yeah, I rather not, thanks.

"Why would we go?" I finally ask, feeling somewhat curious about her response. Seriously, why is it important? She's acting so dramatically and I don't get it.

"Because you're openly dating and it's important that you continue to show that," Ariel says, as if that should explain everything. It doesn't and I'm left sitting with a confused expression that frustrates her.

Sorry that my brain functions differently than yours, but I need an explanation! There are those pursed lips again. I think her face is actually about to turn blue from the air she's holding in.

"Aron, Quinton, you have to go!" she whines.

"No," Quinton and I respond in unison, causing me to look at him since he has been quiet since Ariel showed up. So he only responds when necessary? Have I mentioned how much of an ass he is lately? Because he is.

He isn't looking away from his book either, somehow reading and eating his lunch at the same time, freaking perfect bastard. How can he multi-task like that? I'm surprised I can breathe and walk at the same time! Oh no, I'm becoming conscious of my breathing. How do you even breathe without actually thinking about it? This is suddenly becoming very complicated.

Ariel shifts her attack to Langley, who nearly chokes on his food when she elbows him. Coughing, Langley slaps his chests a few times before looking at his rather angry girlfriend. It seems someone wasn't paying attention because I can tell he does not know what we're talking about. I am

even more sure when he looks at me with wide eyes that scream for assistance. Obviously I give none because this is hilarious!

“Langley, tell them they have to go to the dance,” Ariel hisses out, as if that’ll change either of our minds.

“Uh…you two need to go to the dance,” Langley says, nodding as if he actually believes that. Ariel’s face says she isn’t pleased with him.

“Someone’s in trouble.” I tease.

“Shut up.” Langley kicks me beneath the table, causing me to flinch. Grumbling, I lean down to rub my abused ankle while watching Ariel roll her eyes.

“You’re no help,” she huffs. “I’m serious. You two need to go. Let the world know that you’re happy and proud of being together. This is a dance and if people see you two there as a couple, it will be really great.”

Quinton is not being helpful, continuing to ignore the issue at hand. I send him a glare, wondering when he’s going to jump into this. He told me he didn’t want to go either, so he should help defend us! Why does he have to always have his nose in a book? I swear his mouth only works when he needs it to. If I didn’t like using it from time to time, I’d tear it right off his damn face!

Where are his smug comments when I need them? Oh, so he can use them against me, but when they would actually be useful he keeps them to himself? I see how it goes, useless boyfriend.

“Listen, that may be true,” I finally admit. Pressing my elbow against the table, I lean over a tad while pointing my spoon at her, as if that’ll prove my point. “But there aren’t even going to be paparazzi there, they aren’t allowed. Besides, we hold hands and shit at school.”

Ariel scoffs.

“Sometimes we hold hands, so people are know we’re,” I hold my hands up to make quotation marks in the air. “Happy and proud of being together. There’s no reason for us to go.”

“Should I be jealous? Because I feel like you just want more guys to show up dressed in suits,” Langley interrupts, earning himself a hateful glare from Ariel and a snort from Quinton.

How come Langley gets a reaction? Quinton’s been sitting here beside me silently since lunch started, but Langley gets him to chuckle. They’re getting too close and I’m not ok with it. Langley’s my best friend, damn it!

“You guys are all useless,” Ariel states, as if it’s a fact rather than her opinion. None of us argue that but, surprisingly, all of us shrug at the same time. Langley and I grin as we fist bump each other while Quinton smirks. That only pisses Ariel off more. “Guys!”

Her pleas fall upon deaf ears, so she drops the subject. Well, kind of drops it, she grumbles about the dance from time to time through lunch, but whatever, she’s done yelling at me. When lunch finally ends, we continue about our day as per usual, going to class, being bored, messing with Quinton when he tries to take notes, the usual.

“You’ve written in my notebook more than I have,” Quinton says as he tucks the notebook away after class.

“I get bored.” I shrug, smiling at the way he rolls his eyes.

That’s right, accept your fate. You’re stuck with me and my need to doodle on all your belongings. Got a problem with it? Didn’t think so. Not that I would say that out loud because then he probably would back talk to me and I ain’t in the mood for his sass.

“You didn’t help much with Ariel at lunch,” I say as the two of us head to the gym to play some basketball. It’s nice to spend time together on campus

without worrying. Since we came out, things have been going smoothly, well, as smooth as they can go for us.

Quinton shrugs, picking up his pace. “There was nothing to say.”

We’re in a bit of a rush to get out of the cold. I shove my hands in my pockets. Quinton buries his face in his scarf. The February air chills even though the wind barely pushes past us. Winter is cruel.

“Backing me up would have been nice,” I hiss, nudging Quinton with my elbow. He grunts and returns the favor, then I do the same and we continue this until Quinton grows tired of my antics and, by my I mean ours because he was part of it!

“What was I supposed to say?” Quinton sighs, whacking my elbow away when I try to stab him with it again. “You said we didn’t want to go, and that’s all there is to it.”

“Yeah and you don’t want to go either, but maybe if we both said it she’d accept it,” I explain and realize how stupid it sounds afterwards. Quinton doesn’t mention how dumb it is, so at least he’s gotten a little nicer.

“Whatever! My point is, back me up when Ariel jumps on me,” I say.

“Where’s the fun in that?”

I jab him with my elbow harder than before. He grunts through his smirk, says the jab was worth it. Jerk. It isn’t until we’re at the gym doors that an explanation for his lack of help comes to mind.

Grinning, I follow Quinton through the doors. When I shut them behind us, I ask, “Maybe you actually want to go?”

Quinton is removing his scarf, causing his voice to come out muffled, “What?”

“The dance,” I elaborate, looking at his slightly red face from the cold. He cocks a brow, and it’s such a familiar look that I know exactly what he’s

thinking; what the hell, Aron? It makes me chuckle. “Do you want to go? If you do, all you have to do is ask!”

Quinton rolls his eyes, looking positively disgusted. “You say that yet by doing so, it seems like you’re the one who wants to go.”

Ok, didn’t think that through and why the hell does it always turn back on me? Grumbling, I point accusingly at him. “Don’t turn this on me. I know you’re just trying to get out of it.”

Quinton clicks his tongue. “Surprisingly, you’ve grown more intelligent. Am I a good influence?”

Oh, I’m going to punch him. Sadly, physical violence is frowned upon. Fine, we’re not using rock, paper, scissors next time. I don’t care about that stupid ego of his.

“Try to put this on me as much as you want, but it won’t work. If you really want to go, I can grace you with my presence.” I pinch his cheeks, which he quickly slaps away with an annoyed grunt.

“You grow more annoying every passing day.”

“Thank you!” I sing, piling my coat atop his before following him to the court where a few others are already playing.

“You didn’t deny it, though,” I whisper, which pisses him off more. The look he gives me says that I am in the doghouse. It seems Langley isn’t the only one who will be using his hand.

The basketball game saves me from the rage monster known as Quinton since he’s on my team. If not, I think he would find a way to actually squish me into a basketball and abuse me for the rest of the game. Instead, he channels that anger to pile drive the other team into the court, which is fine by me. The less angry he is after the game, the less pissy he’ll be later and I

rather not put up with his pissy ways. He calls me annoying but nothing is worse than a pissed off Quinton!

In the end, we win three out of four games, had a blast too, and are now sitting half dead on the bleachers. Even Quinton is short of breath, pressing his elbows against the bleachers behind him. I, on the other hand, have no issue resting on the floor, spread out like a starfish because I am sweaty and I want to. Don’t judge me.

It’s the sound of one guy saying fuck off, followed by snickering that attracts my attention. I raise my head to find Johnny, a classmate playing with us earlier, leaning over his friend Ira’s shoulder. Curiously, I listen in like the creep that I am and grin at hearing what it’s about.

“Looking to get something for your girlfriend?” Johnny teases, proceeding to pinch Ira in the side.

Ira smacks his friend's hand away, but it’s too late. Everyone else jumps in to tease Ira as well. To say he’s embarrassed would be an understatement. He’s smiling sheepishly while blushing as everyone pokes fun at him. Although I know some of them have girlfriends, so obviously, they’re doing the same. They just weren’t caught!

“Someone’s gonna be happy this Valentine’s Day!” Johnny says in almost a singing fashion.

“Shut your face, Johnny. At least I have a girlfriend,” Ira responds, smiling at Johnny, who throws his hand over his chest in fake anguish.

“Oh, the pain!” Johnny falls back on the bleachers. “Get me an ice pack for that burn.”

It seems Johnny is done pointing the attention at Ira, though. As if he is literally hit with an idea, he bolts back up. Everyone watches as his eyes

turn to Quinton and me, who are actually staring at him in shared confusion. Slowly, he smiles so evilly that I actually contemplate scurrying away.

“What about you two?” Johnny asks.

“What about us?” I reply, sitting up to massage my aching legs.

“Are you going to the dance?” Johnny fires finger guns at us.

Quinton, once again, remains silent but rolls his eyes. I have to answer on my own again. I really need to learn how to master Quinton’s unsociable ways; they would come in real handy sometimes.

“No.” I shrug. “We’re not going.”

“What? Why the hell not?” Johnny’s almost as offended as Ariel. His face scrunches up in confusion. “You’re dating and it’s the Valentine’s Day dance. There’s shitty music and free food. What else do you want in life?”

“Good music and free food?” I suggest, and now it’s Johnny’s turn to roll his eyes.

Surprisingly, Ira jumps in too. Now I have two people telling me and I’m not ok with it!

“You guys should go. It’s always fun. Quinton had a blast last year, or at least his date did,” Ira claims.

I smile at the memory of learning that Autumn punched someone while also feeling sad I missed such a beautiful thing. Quinton smirks proudly, like the memory actually brings him great joy. It probably does, but I can’t blame him. Hearing it was funny enough, but witnessing it? I bet it was epic!

“Yeah, right, this stick in the mud would probably just stand in the corner the whole time.” I gesture at Quinton, who kicks me in response. I grab his ankle and twist until he kicks it away from me.

“Implying that you want to dance with him?” Johnny wiggles his eyebrows, then stands and pretends to slow dance with someone. Everyone gets a hoot out of it as they laugh and, thankfully, jump onto teasing him. Soon all the attention is on Johnny, which gives Quinton and me time to scurry away without notice.

We’re on our way back to the dorms now. Quinton seems to have let off some steam, seeing as he isn’t trying to bury me in the snow. As tempted as I am to shove him into the snowbank, I decide against it since I’m already in trouble. It’s not unusual though, I tend to be on his nerves 99% of the time. What can I say? It’s what I’m best at!

We reach Quinton’s dorm first. It’s nearing curfew so I say goodbye to him, leaning up for a quick kiss, then turning to leave. However, before I take more than a few steps, a hand wraps itself around my wrist. With a soft tug, I stop and look curiously at Quinton. His face is devoid of emotion, though that means he’s feeling a lot and trying to hide it. Funny how I notice such things now, but I guess that’s what happens when you’ve been with someone nearly a year.

“What’s up?” I ask, stepping towards him. His hold is still on my wrist, nothing tight but enough to tell me he has something to say. I don’t have a clue what it could be or why it’s causing him to hesitate. His hesitation makes me a little nervous.

Quinton remains silent for a few moments. We linger in the cold; the wind brushing past us in short bursts, causing my body to shiver. I rather not turn into a popsicle, so I gently tug on Quinton’s hand to request he tell me what’s up. Though I don’t want to rush him, I don’t want to stay out here more than necessary either. If we’re gonna talk, then let’s go inside!

Before I can suggest stepping indoors, Quinton speaks, and it causes the air to be knocked from my lungs. “Let’s go to the dance.”

“Huh?”

I’m sorry, did I hear right? I think the wind was blowing too hard and I may have heard someone else’s conversation. Clearly Quinton didn’t suggest we got to the Valentine’s Day dance together. No way, not happening. I’m hearing things, and so I dig my gloved finger into my ear as I ask him to elaborate, “Come again?”

Except it has to be true, because Quinton’s face grows redder than it was a second ago. Though he can attribute the blush to the wind, I know the cold didn’t do that much in under a second. He’s blushing and now I’m blushing and it’s totally weird. What is going on? Who is this person? It’s my job to freak out during times like this, not yours! Do your job, Quinton!

“You heard me,” Quinton says so quietly that I know he’s right. I heard him correctly.

“You…wanna go to the dance?” I ask.

When he doesn’t say no, that’s his way of saying yes, sad that I know that.

I’m suddenly a lot warmer now, trying to wrap my brain around what he said. We said before that we didn’t want to go. As soon as the dance was brought up at school, we looked at each other and agreed not to go. We thought it wouldn’t be any fun because Quinton doesn’t like to dance. Not to mention last year someone wanted to prank him. Sure, people seem to have let go a bit about Quinton’s dad, but the fact remains that he isn’t the most popular guy, so what’s going on?

Ok, calm down, take a minute, breathe in and out, then…freak the fuck out?

“Wha…why do you suddenly want to go?” I ask, wondering if it has to do with everyone pressuring us for some time.

Ariel was getting at us, Johnny and Ira were, even some kids in class were questioning us if we were going. I get they weren’t trying to pressure us, but perhaps it did? And Quinton is feeling obligated to go? Cause I don’t really know if I want to.

Quinton’s response stumps me when he asks, “Why don’t you want to go?”

Good question and I’ll get back to him when I have an answer! I don’t really know why. Maybe because I figured Quinton didn’t want to go? However, now that he does, the dance doesn’t seem like a bad idea. At the same time, it makes my skin crawl. I’m all for dancing like an idiot and with Langley there it’ll be fun, but…

“Do you actually want to go?” I inquire. My nose feels ready to fall off, yet it seems I no longer care about my sense of smell. “People have been bugging us about it. You’re not, like, feeling obligated to go, right?”

Because I am definitely not going if that’s the case. However, I’ve forgotten who I’m speaking to. As if Quinton would feel obligated to go to anything. The expression he shows me after my question screams how stupid he sees me right now and I can’t blame him for that.

Realizing my mistake, I breathe out, “Right. That’s definitely not it.”

Which means Quinton actually wants to go to the dance with me. What universe are we in?

I’m left standing before Quinton with what I bet to be a very confused expression. I would call it blank but, knowing me, it’s definitely not. I can’t pull off a Quinton. However, the longer I remain quiet, the more anxious Quinton becomes. Soon, his grip tightens on my wrist, ever so slightly. He’s

shaking, it’s cold, so that makes sense, but I swear his eyes are shaking with a sense of worry that I’ll say no.

Didn’t I say earlier that I would say no if he asked?

“Ok, we can go.” Well, apparently, I was lying.

“I’m so happy to hear you two are going to the dance!” Mom squeals over the phone as I attempt to balance it between my shoulder and face.

I’m currently digging through my closet to see if I have a suit with me because I don’t feel like going out to buy one.

“Make sure to take pictures, though, Aron! I want to see my boys all dressed up together. Oh, will there be a photographer there? Maybe we should hire one so everyone can get some great pictures!”

“Mom.” I sigh, bringing up my hand to pinch the bridge of my nose. “Please, it’s just a dance.”

“But you and Quinton are going to be all dolled up and I’m going to miss it!”

“You see us dressed up all the time now. Christmas break we went and saw a play and we were in suits!”

“But that was ages ago.”

I want to smack myself in the face, yet somehow refrain from doing so. I wish to point out that it wasn’t even two months ago, but apparently that equals ages. Whatever, I don’t get mothers.

With a deep breath, I tell myself to calm down before finally breathing out, “I will make sure to get some pictures, so do not hire a photographer. I’ll call you later. Love you.”

“Love you too. Tell Quinny I love him too, or wait, I’ll just text him, or maybe I should call. I’ll decide later. Love you both!” With that, Mom finally hangs up.

I’m left wondering if she’s going to call or text Quinton. He can’t ignore her because she’s my mom and even he knows not to be that much of an ass. It’s always great to see his expression when my mom acts all lovey with him. He never knows what to do other than accept it, but I know he loves it.

Shaking my head, I toss my phone aside as I bring out the suit that I found. I change into it just to make sure it fits. When I find that it’s perfectly fine, I put the suit back in the closet before calling up Quinton. I end up chuckling when it goes to voicemail because it makes me think Mom actually called him.

A few minutes later, Quinton calls. Rather than saying hello, I ask, “Did you just get off the phone with my mom?”

“Yeah,” is his immediate answer that has me laughing. It may take a few moments for me to catch my breath while I hear a very light chuckle from Quinton as well.

“Did she tell you she loves you and we have to take pictures?”

“Yeah.” I swear I heard a bit of embarrassment in his voice, but that’s what happens when someone speaks with my mom.

“Do you have that suit with you that my parents got you?” I ask, wondering if we have to go into town or not to retrieve him a new one. He’ll put up a fight if we do because he hates my parents or me buying him anything. Of course, my parents don’t give two shits and get him stuff anyway and he’s too proper to refuse, so he better just get used to it.

“Yeah, I tried it on and it still fits, so we’re good.”

“Wow, you sound like a normal teenager when you say it like that. You feeling ok?” I tease and I swear I can hear his eyes rolling.

“I’m never ok when speaking with you.”

“Oh, see, that would be harsh if you didn’t talk to me on a regular basis, but to make you feel better I’ll pretend to be hurt.” Although he isn’t here, I place a hand over my chest and pout. “Ouch, that’s so offensive, Quinny. You’re so mean to me.”

“I’m going to punch you in the face,” Quinton threatens in his normal pissy tone that only makes me grin.

“I’m heading over.”

“I’m not letting you in.” He hangs up.

I gape at the phone in my hand, contemplating whether he’ll actually lock me out. With a frown, I take the risk and head over to Quinton’s, only to end up standing outside his door pounding on it and making annoying sounds for fifteen minutes since he seriously locked me out. However, being annoying is my specialty, and the door is ripped open to show a bothered Quinton, who rolls his eyes and lets me in with a defeated sigh.

I make myself comfortable on Quinton’s bed, burying myself within the warmth of his comforter as I watch him take his place at his desk. He must have been, go figure. Not as if it’s unusual for Quinton to be reading or studying while I do, well, anything else besides that shit. I actually ended up bringing my gaming console to his dorm so I can play while he acts like a total bookworm.

It’s also not unusual for Quinton to eventually get up from his desk to join me on the bed about ten minutes later. I think nothing of it, scooting over to make room for him, then allowing the boy to rest beside me with his legs crossed. He highlights whatever he deems important before jumping to the

next page. Feeling the warmth of his thigh makes me smile and later, when he's done studying, Quinton makes himself more comfortable.

I should be angry at how easily I move for Quinton to rest behind me with his legs on either side of my thighs. His arms wrap around my midsection, placing his head on my shoulder to watch me play. He snickers when I do something really stupid or pinches me to upset my focus. I'm cursing at him more than I am the TV but it's so normal for us it's second nature. Quinton may not enjoy video games, but he enjoys watching me play. From time to time, I ask if he'd like to try. He rarely ever does, insisting that I play and he watches for whatever strange reason. Whatever, more fun for me!

It's a bit odd how my brain functions. One second it's thinking about raining justice from above, and the next it's contemplating if Quinton had always wanted to go to the dance but said nothing. Perhaps he thought he couldn't ask because I was so adamant on not going? We both said no, though. Maybe he changed his mind later and felt he couldn't voice it? Maybe he felt obligated to agree with me since I made it so obvious that I didn't want to go? The thought brings a frown to my face. I take a peek at Quinton, who still has his head resting on my shoulder. He doesn't catch my glance, continuing to watch the screen with a relaxed expression that I've gotten used to seeing on him. Biting my lip, I try to shake off those thoughts.

As if I could do that. It's like my mind can't allow me a moment of peace. I leave the game before the next match. I don't know what I'm going to say or ask or do, but I feel like I need Quinton to know that if he wants to do something, he can. He doesn't need permission from me or, like, I don't know…don't go along with me? I'm an idiot most of the time. He should

know that and it’s totally fine to question me because, honestly, I need someone to!

Curiously, Quinton looks up to me, seeming to find my face to be concerning because he ends up asking, “What’s with the look?”

“Did you feel you couldn’t ask me to the dance because I was so adamant about not going?” I blurt out, wondering why my brain and mouth can’t listen to one another. I wanted to give myself some time to properly ask the question! Let me beat around the bush, damn it, but no, my mouth just has to spew shit all the time. Freaking ridiculous, am I the only one with this problem?

Quinton leans his head back, tilting it to the side in a mixture of confusion and discontent, likely because he doesn’t want to answer. “What?”

“Did you possibly always want to go to the dance, and I made you feel like you couldn’t ask?” I try rephrasing the question while contemplating if it’s better or worse the second time. By Quinton’s facial expression that remains the same, I think it’s safe to say, both sucked.

Ok, let me try some more. “I guess I’m curious if you felt like you couldn’t ask me or maybe thought I would tease you if you asked. If you want to go to a dance or a movie or a play or whatever with me, then I’ll obviously go with you because…y’know…you’re my…”

I wave my hand at him as if to say the word without saying it, which is honestly stupid, but it’s because he’s giving me that stupid look of his. Of course Quinton has to be an ass and act as if he doesn’t know what I’m doing. He is totally aware, and it pisses me off!

Grinning from ear to ear, he leans in to retake the spot on my shoulder. I scowl at the amusement twinkling in his eyes as he asks, “I’m your… what?”

“You know damn well what and stop staring at me like that,” I growl, trying to turn in his grasp to get a more intimidating spot somewhere, like standing or not in his lap. Sadly, my squirming only leads to his grip tightening until I feel like a python has wrapped around my waist.

“I’m not staring at you in any particular way,” Quinton argues, but his smirk says he knows what he’s doing.

I steal his threat from earlier. “Ok, now I’m going to punch you in the face.”

Rolling his eyes, Quinton loosens his grip while trusting that I do not move…which I don’t, but we don’t need to point that out.

Smiling, Quinton says the word for me, “Because I’m your boyfriend, you’ll go with me.”

“Yes, that.” I point at him as if that’s somehow needed.

“How sweet.” His tone tells me he doesn’t think it’s sweet, though. He’s not answering my question either.

Scowling, I elbow him lightly in the stomach, causing him to grunt in response. “Did you feel like you couldn’t ask or something?”

By Quinton’s expression, I can tell he was hoping I would drop it. However, he has learned by now that I don’t drop anything and he should just answer. It’s easier if he gives in though from time to time he tries to be stubborn. I can’t say anything because I’m just as bad. It’s sad that I can admit to that but whatever, at least I know, doesn’t that make it kind of ok? No? Yes? Maybe?

With a heavy sigh, Quinton leans back again, removing his head from my shoulder for a second time. He seems uncomfortable, which I am not surprised by because any time we have a “serious” conversation, we’re both uncomfortable. We’re like the anti-serious squad, wanting to avoid all

romantic or serious talks because neither of us wants to face our own feelings.

Wow, maybe I don't need to see a therapist because I'm sounding like one.

"I didn't really want to go," Quinton finally responds but hesitates to continue as if he hopes I'll magically read his mind and get the right answer. When that doesn't happen, he explains further. "But, the more I thought about it, I thought that when I went with Autumn, it was fun, so it would be even better if I went…with you."

He practically mumbled out that last part, but it makes my cheeks heat up, regardless. Feeling my chest warm up along with my cheeks causes my brain to take a momentary break from properly functioning to simply scream, whether with excitement or embarrassment, I'm not too sure. Quinton refuses to look at me, embarrassed by his admittance, as simple as it is, but, hell, I would be too.

"Oh," I mumble, realizing that's probably not the best reaction, so I try to come up with a better one but do not know if it is or not. "I guess if I'm involved, it's always fun."

Quinton gives me an incredulous look that has me sheepishly grinning in response. Shaking his head, he releases a soft chuckle, "Think whatever you want, Princess."

"Sorry, I don't know how to respond when you say nice things," I tease.

Quinton shrugs as if to agree with that, seeing as he doesn't say shit like that often, nor do I. However, I think it makes them even more special when he does. Quinton is more of the type to show his feelings through actions rather than words, and I don't find a damn thing wrong with that. I appreciate it when he speaks, though, because I know how hard it is for him

to do so. The fact that he puts himself into uncomfortable situations for me is…nice, it's just nice.

Now that we have agreed to go to the dance, it means the day arrives in the blink of an eye.

I'm nervously examining myself in the mirror, checking if my hair looks too stiff with gel in it or if I look too excited. Obviously, I look thrilled and I kind of hate myself for that. I try to pull a Quinton and scowl, but it doesn't work. I can't even get my body to lie to itself about how excited I am to be going to the dance.

My stomach churns. I can't say that I feel ill because that doesn't quite explain the feeling. No, those are butterflies, the type that make my toes curl and my heart beat wildly in my chest. My cheeks are on fire as I try to cool them down by splashing cold water on my face. It doesn't help and the damn things only get worse when I hear my door open. I know exactly who it is seeing as Langley already left to pick up Ariel.

Ok, I can do this. It's fine, everything is cool. We're just going to a dance, a Valentine's Day Dance, which is made for couples and we're a couple, so it's cool, fine, totally normal. There is nothing to worry about, no need to feel nervous…

Then why am I so nervous?!

"If you aren't ready, I'm leaving without you," Quinton threatens from outside the bathroom door.

I growl at his sass that can't even let itself up on Valentine's Day. Hell, it doesn't even let up after sex, so I guess Valentine's Day doesn't stand a chance.

Rolling my eyes, I walk towards the door, pushing it open slowly as if I expect a prank. Honestly, I kind of do. Maybe Quinton just planned all this

to tease me later about being excited to go? It sounds like a jackass thing he would do…

Except no prank ensues. Instead, I walk out of the bathroom to find Quinton waiting patiently with his hands in his pockets, looking absolutely gorgeous in a tux. His hair is gelled like my own, reminding me of the time we went to see that play over summer. He has a tie on that matches my own, courtesy of my mother, who refused to let us do otherwise, yet he doesn't seem at all bothered by it. In fact, he has this sort of soft smile on his face that's nearly nonexistent, but to me, it's blaring.

"Are you ready or not?" Quinton asks, cocking a brow at me after I seem to have forgotten how to speak.

"Uh…" Sorry, still can't speak yet. Too busy staring.

Quinton, noticing this, smirks as he steps towards me. "See something you like?"

"I could ask you the same question," I respond, pointing accusingly to that smile of his that I know is there. Others may not notice it as I do, but the more time I spend with Quinton the better I read him, or maybe he's just opening up more to me. I kind of hope it's a bit of both.

Quinton rolls his eyes, choosing not to respond to that. Good, because I wouldn't have a snarky response. My brain is barely functioning and I'm lucky I got that out earlier. Allow me a moment to compose myself, not that I'm ever that composed, but I can dream.

"Before we go…" Quinton speaks softly, the almost nervous undertone of his voice catching my attention immediately.

Curiously, I watch Quinton turn from confident to anxious right before my eyes. It isn't glaringly obvious, unlike me, who practically screams my emotions without words, but it's certainly there. His eyes lose that natural

charisma that they have. I don't know why or what he could want to say to make him this way, but I know that teasing him about it won't help. For once, I keep my mouth shut and wait, kind of, patiently.

Quinton sticks his hand into his pocket to grasp something. He refuses to face me, his eyes remaining on the floor while it appears that he's having an inner battle with himself. Suddenly, Quinton pulls something out of his pocket, holding it before me without uttering a word. My heart stops as I take the gift from Quinton's hand, holding it while I try my best not to squeal like a pig.

"Matching hemp bracelets?" I ask, so embarrassed that I'm probably red up to my ears, but I'm so totally ok with it, it's almost sickening. My stomach twists into knots. My heart screams in joy, staring at the matching yellow and red bracelets. Yellow being my favorite color and red is Quinton's.

"Did you…make these?"

Quinton nods.

Fuck, this is the best present anyone has ever given me.

"It's not like I could buy you anything, Money Bags," Quinton answers, twisting his bracelet between his fingertips. He has yet to fix his gaze on me. The lightest dusting of pink known to humankind is beneath his eyes and it only makes my heart soar even more. "I know it's not really the best gift. You don't have to wear it—"

Quinton can't finish that ridiculous statement because I have already crashed our lips together. He didn't expect the kiss, so Quinton can't even stop me from pressing my tongue between his lips, passionately kissing the boy that is somehow the most unromantic-romantic person I've ever met. Damn it, he's so frustrating, but feeling him kiss as eagerly back makes my

heart do back flips. Feeling his arms slip around my waist, holding me flush against him, it feels right, like we fit perfectly and it reminds me that, even with all his annoying flaws, I love this rotten bastard.

Pulling apart after a good five-minute make-out session, I press my forehead against his, lingering there to continue feeling his unusual warmth. The natural movement from our breathing causes our lips to brush. We neither pull each other closer or away. Somehow, it's still as intimate as a kiss.

"I'm never taking this damn thing off," I snicker, slipping on the bracelet while requesting Quinton's help to tie it properly.

He rolls his eyes but says nothing as he helps. Then I instruct him to let me do the same. Quinton's blush actually darkens while watching me tie his own bracelet around his wrist. It feels very personal, like we're binding ourselves to each other. Shit, now I'm blushing. Wait, wasn't I already? I probably am, but it's a moment that's worthy of blushing! Right? Right, I don't know anymore. My brain isn't working. Send help.

"Sorry, I didn't really get you anything," I whisper, frowning at the realization that Quinton must have thought hard about this gift while I didn't even get him a box of chocolate. Bastard doesn't even like chocolate, why must he complicate things?

Quinton shrugs. "I didn't expect you to."

Well, I suppose I can easily make it up to him. Besides, even if I got Quinton something, I don't feel like it would match up to this. It's simple, but for Quinton it speaks more than anything else could. He always has to be the perfectionist, doesn't he? I guess that's ok for this instance. I will one him up in the gift department one day, though!

Smiling, I wrap my arms around Quinton's shoulders, keeping him close to me as I say, "I love you, Quinton."

Seeing his lips pull back into a smile instantly is as breathtaking as ever. Each day, it feels like I'm graced with the sight a little more and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"I love you too, Aron. Happy Valentine's Day."

"Happy Valentine's Day," I whisper before being pulled in for another kiss. After tonight, I think I'll just agree to attend any event with Quinton. I know with him by my side I'll always be happy.

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COLLEGE EXTRA

Mom snaps pictures like there's no tomorrow. Dad speaks with the guards about the security measures needed to be taken throughout the day. I'm doing my best to contain myself from smacking them both over the head.

"I'm going to be late!" I holler over all the commotion. The grip on my backpack is frustratingly tight, and it only gets worse.

"Oh sweetie, you're fine, you're fine!" Mom says while trying to request one worker to take a picture with the both of us. I sigh as she holds me against her with a huge grin. When she sees I am not grinning, she slaps me in the chest. "Smile, Aron! I want a good picture of your first day of college!"

College. Oh joy. Yes, let us celebrate the start of four more years of schooling, of exams that will eat away my soul and long lectures that will test my ability to stay awake. Definitely a time worth celebrating! Because I

haven’t gone through this before with kindergarten, middle school, and high school twice, seeing as Mom was also like this when I went to Thorton’s.

“You got a bunch of pictures with Quinton yesterday,” I remind her about the torture—I’m sorry—photo shoot she basically put Quinton and I through.

He had to head home last night to make it to his own classes today, so my mom went nuts snapping pictures of her two favorite college boys. Quinton actually wasn’t that bothered by it because he has officially accepted my parents’ insanity and is no longer shocked by their actions. Should I be happy or sad about that? Either way, pictures have already been taken.

“Just a few more and I’ll be done!” she declares.

Another ten minutes pass of pictures before Dad has to pull Mom and her camera away, so I won’t be late. I wave goodbye and I swear Mom cries a bit. Shaking my head, I slip into the car to head to my first day of college classes. That’s terrifying just thinking about it.

The ride is filled with the sound of the radio. I sink into the back seat, picking at my bag in my arms. I’m more nervous than I’ve ever been. I don’t even remember being this nervous on my first day at Thorton’s. Perhaps that was because I was a cheeky little shit while now I am frantically wondering how I am going to make friends when my dad has decided to send about 25 guards with me. How am I and my fellow students meant to focus when there are two dozen armed men in the room? Exactly, we can’t, so I’m going to have to talk him down a few notches.

Sighing, I throw my head against the seat until we reach our destination. I get out of the car and immediately get bombarded with paparazzi and questions. There are flashing lights from their cameras all around. Students either stop to point and stare or run in the opposite direction. The guards

keep most of the paparazzi at a comfortable distance, but it’s annoying. I don’t see what the big deal is. People have known I would attend Holland University for months.

I shrug it off and quickly make my way to my first class. A few of the guards remain closer now while others span out over the area and it’s a bit suffocating, more so because I see students walking past at a distance or turning down a hall to wait until I pass by. It makes me bite my lip to keep back a frown.

Moments later, I snicker at the message I receive from Langley that simply says, fuck waking up early again. I don’t bother replying since I’ve already made it to class. He must be on his way. My assumption is proven correct when he arrives five minutes later with tired eyes and bed hair.

The guards surrounding me don’t bother or shock Langley. He waltzes past them, up to me, and takes a seat. I’m sure if he were someone else, the guards would be on him like lions on a legless zebra. However, they know Langley, know his family, and so trust him. I smile at the crusted over eyes Langley has and chuckle when he attempts to wipe it all away with the back of his hands.

“Are you ready for four more years of hell?” Langley asks around a yawn that threatens to tear his lips.

“No, are you?” I chuckle.

“I’ve got at least eight years’ worth of tissues stashed away for all the emotional breakdowns to come.”

“Way to be prepared.” I laugh, watching students pile into class. A few look our way, their eyes growing wide either out of shock, fear, or curiosity. I don’t know, but it’s obvious they all steer away from me.

The entire row in front of me, as well as behind, are empty. Our professor arrives, though, waits for the last few students while she messes around with things on her desk. The stragglers making their way in are forced to take the empty seats. They all keep as much distance as possible from me. It causes me to frown again. I bite at the insides of my cheeks before shaking it off and smiling once more at Langley, who has already caught it.

“They mean nothing by it, Aron. You’re surrounded by armed guards,” Langley says. I’m not surprised he noticed either. Considering I have mentioned a few times before classes started, I was worried about fitting in.

Holland differs from Thorton’s. I don’t have mostly the same people in class. I don’t live in a dorm. I don’t have guards around campus, though obviously Holland has some of its own personal ones. Instead, my guards surround me. It’s no surprise that the only person willing to take the risk of sitting next to me is Langley. Not to say I’m unhappy about that. At least I have Langley, but it would be nice to make a few more friends. By the state of things, that either won’t happen or will take some time.

Sighing, I shrug and reply, “I know. Doesn’t change the fact that it bothers me.”

“Talk to your dad about lessening the scare detail.” Langley gestures at the declared scare detail, who have caught onto what Langley said because one guard narrows his eyes. Langley grins sheepishly and shrugs prior to turning his attention to our professor, that has started class.

I already talked to Dad about the guards, though. I get that I’m in public, that there’s a risk of me being hurt. However, having an army around me is going to bother everyone else. Hell, I’m accustomed to them and they still creep the hell out of me. No one enjoys being followed by giant angry penguins with wires hanging out their ears. It’s weird!

I grumble about the angry penguins after our first class. Langley and I have an hour break until our next class, though we do not share the same one. We sit on the lawn outside with everyone clearly avoiding us. People scurry past with their heads down or the quite opposite, with their eyes locked on me while obviously talking about me. I groan and fall back onto the lawn next to Langley, who continues snickering about it.

“It’s like you’re famous or something,” Langley sings, grinning. I flip him off, which only makes him laugh harder. “Well, good luck in your next class. Try not to make the entire room piss themselves.”

“I’m not the one that scares them,” I hiss, waving goodbye to Langley as he heads off to his own class.

Getting up, I walk to mine, head down and hands stuffed in my pockets. I kick my feet about the sidewalk, scuffing my shoes. How am I meant to fit in or make friends when they’re all too scared to talk to me? I thought the only way to survive college was by making new friends to panic and cry about classes together with? I can’t do that if none of them will come anywhere near me!

I actually stop and stare at the people who literally cross the street to avoid me. My jaw drops when realizing that not a single person is on the same street as me. They see me coming their way then cross. I can’t even blame them. This sucks. I glare at the guards, who haven’t really done anything to deserve the fuming attention. Sighing, I tell myself to just last the day and when I get home, I will talk to Dad because this is ridiculous.

Getting to my next class, I sit down in the back with my eyes locked on my notebook. It is a repeat of my earlier class; students pile in, see me, and head in the opposite direction. To distract myself, I doodle in my notebook. Doodling doesn’t really help, but it is worth a shot.

Being alone in class is far worse because it constantly feels like eyes are on me, yet there is no one to talk to, no one to joke with, no one to help pretend like I'm enjoying myself or not completely uncomfortable. I look up, catch people staring or whispering about me then watch them look away awkwardly or, sometimes, snicker and turn around as if they are perfectly ok with having been caught. I roll my eyes, doodle their faces in my book, then poke said faces with said pencil because why the hell not? They're snickering about me, so I'm assaulting them with a pencil. It's fair!

I'm relieved that the first day is easy, though. Most professors review the syllabus. There's no actual note taking since the syllabus has been printed for us and passed out. Most of the day I sit at my desk wondering how I am going to survive or get out of college without a full head of gray hair. Although, I think I could pull off gray hair. They're always the most popular characters in anime.

When the day ends, there's a lingering sense of dejection and a bit of self-loathing. Mom is going to ask me about my day, and I have absolutely nothing to say to her. She's going to be so excited only to hear how everyone avoided me and nothing happened.

After saying goodbye to Langley, I drag my feet back to the car. As I am dragging my feet, I pull out my phone to check the time. Quinton should be out of class, so I hold my phone against my ear while I wait for him to answer.

"Miss me already, Princess?"

Fuck it, I shouldn't have called.

"You know the Princess thing is getting old. Can you find some other way to taunt me, or is your vocabulary so limited, Quinny?" I hiss into the phone, my cheeks heating up when I realize the guards can hear me.

“Why would I change it when it pisses you off just as much every time I say it?” Quinton replies smugly, like there is a time when he isn’t smug.

I can’t even say anything to that because it’s true. Sighing, I ask, “How was your first day?”

“Are we really doing this boring ‘how was your day’ talk? I won’t answer anymore if that’s the case.”

I roll my eyes, making a mental note to keep that in mind because I know he will stop answering.

“No,” I reply, shrugging, as if he can see me. I’m actually getting even slower with my walking the closer I get to the parking lot. I’m dreading going home to disappoint my mom. “I was just curious.”

Something tells me my voice made Quinton aware that something happened, or rather didn’t happen. He is silent for a moment, seeming to think over whether or not to bring up that he knows something is up. Eventually, he sighs and asks, “What is it?”

“What?” I play dumb.

“If you keep playing dumb, I’m just going to call Langley,” Quinton threatens, something that he now does since I have Autumn to call and Quinton has Langley.

I’m actually surprised that the two get along so well. They even text one another occasionally. It kind of sucks because Langley happily divulges everything to Quinton, so I can’t keep anything from him. Not that I do, but if I wanted to, I couldn’t. I’m even more shocked though Quinton and Ariel are on speaking terms as well. They got closer over our senior year of high school. They message each other and he has no quarrel when I ask if he wishes to spend time with Langley and Ariel. Part of me feels proud because I’ve brought two more people into Quinton’s life that he obviously

cares a bit about if he's putting up with them. At the same time, I regret it because now he has more ammunition to tease me with.

Grumbling about useless best friends, I give in and explain, "Everyone is avoiding me and the surrounding army. How am I meant to make it through college when everyone fears me? What if we have group projects and half of them piss themselves when they realize that they have to work next to the men with guns? I can't... this is awful!"

"It's the first day, Aron," Quinton says, attempting to keep his voice reassuring, but something tells me he wants to tease me. No, I know he does, but I give him credit for containing the urge. "You can't expect them to get the nerve to talk to you. Give it some time and eventually they'll avoid you because of your actual personality."

"I felt better until that last part." I take it back. He gets no credit. He's an asshole through and through.

"What about you?" I ask. "Did you make any friends?"

The sad thing is the moment I hear Quinton snort, I laugh. We both know that didn't happen. I try to contain my laughter as I slip into my car, but fail. The idea of Quinton making friends willingly is so foreign to me I can't even imagine it. I bet he will go a year before even dubbing someone an acquaintance.

"I am not in college to make friends," Quinton explains. "In fact, I would like to lose some of the current ones I have."

"You can always stop talking to Langley," I suggest hopefully.

"Why would I do that? I like Langley," Quinton says, his voice telling me he purposelessly said that to irritate me.

People would think after being together for over a year that Quinton and I would have gotten used to saying I love you or I like you, but we haven't.

We don’t say it before hanging up or every time he’s over or through text. It’s always in person, always for simple things, simple reasons where the other person doesn’t really expect the words. We both know we could say it more, but simply don’t for whatever reason. I’m kind of ok with it though because if I heard it everyday I think I wouldn’t appreciate it as much. Either way, Quinton always reminds me he likes my friends just to irk me. Not that I don’t say the same thing about Autumn and it irks him. Two can play this game!

“I’m not ok with the fact that he has more credit with you than I do.”

“He’s not annoying.”

“Whatever. Back to important matters. What am I supposed to say to my mom when she wants to know all the great stuff that happened at school today? You should have seen her this morning! She put me through another photoshoot.” I throw my hand over my face at the memory. A shiver runs down my spine as I think about all the new pictures she’s going to have hung up all over the place.

Quinton snickers.

“Screw you, it’s not funny! Oh god, what if she makes me go through another?” I groan, causing Quinton to snicker more. “I don’t know what to say to her. Nothing happened. I was avoided. I was alone. I didn’t do anything!”

“Tell her that.”

“No, she’ll get all depressed!”

He knows that! He knows what she’s like, but he doesn’t care because he doesn’t have to put up with her. I do!

“Talk to her about class,” Quinton suggests, making me grumble as I realize that’s about the only thing I can do. With a heavy sigh, I agree. We

remain on the phone for the rest of the ride. Once I get home, we say our goodbyes, at least for now, and I get out of the car just before Mom basically tackles me.

“Sweetie, how was your day? Oh, you must tell me all about it!” Mom shrieks, almost blowing out my eardrums. I dig into my ear with my finger, squinting my eyes as I plead with her not to scream. She’s too busy screaming to hear.

“Class was fine,” I answer, walking inside with Mom glued to my arm. Her eyes widen with curiosity, nodding to tell me to continue. I bite my lip, glance back to the security detail, then to her. Sighing, I do as Quinton said and tell her about my expectations in class and whether or not I think I’ll like them.

Sadly, my mother is more interested in another topic and she brings it up by asking, “Did you make any friends? Meet any new people?”

She has us sitting in the living room on the couch. She’s got her legs up on the couch with her back pressed to the arm while I’m on the opposite side, basically doing the same thing. She looks so happy about the prospect of me making friends it makes my stomach drop as I think up a lie that will hopefully not tear her hopes to shreds.

“Uh, no. Not really. Mostly everyone came in and listened, then frantically looked for their next classes so I didn’t really talk to anyone,” I reply, hoping that she bought it. I’m going to try talking to Dad about the security detail so that maybe I can make some friends.

Mom frowns. “Aw, that’s a pity. No worries though, sweetheart! People will start talking to one another soon.” She walks over to me to place a kiss on my forehead. “You’ll make some more friends soon enough.”

I hope so.

Thankfully, Mom asks nothing more about my day, which gives me time to come up with more excuses to give her in case she does. I hope Dad will listen to me and lighten up on the guards when I talk to him. It isn't until later that evening that I actually get to talk to him, seeing as he was busy all day with meetings. I had a few hours to think over what I wanted to say, but as I stand before the doors to his office, I suddenly forget all of it.

Panicking, I question whether I need to see a doctor about how easily I forget everything. What did I want to say again? I thought up something good yet it's already slipped my mind! I groan, stomp my feet childishly outside the door and regret it immediately when the door swings open to show my dad staring at me. His lips twitch back into a smile that I glare at. My glare intensifies when he chuckles and asks, "What are you doing?"

"I was coming up to talk to you," I answer, clearing my throat as I try to regain some of my dignity after my mini tantrum that was meant to be private.

"Oh, I was about to head down for dinner."

"I was hoping we could talk in private," I interrupt before he can head down to the dining room. Dinner isn't ready, so we have time to talk. I would rather not talk in front of Mom. Sure, she will probably side with me if I did, but I don't want her worrying about me.

Dad nods, his eyes telling me he's now curious what I have to say. He steps back into his office, allowing me to follow him inside, where we both head over to his desk to take a seat. He sits in his chair behind the desk while I take a seat in front of it, clearing my throat a second time as I try to consider my phrasing. Should I be blunt? It's my dad, so there's nothing wrong with being blunt.

“Can we lighten up on the security detail?” I ask. The moment I do Dad gets this look like he knew this was coming. “I know I need it because I’m me, but Dad, you should have seen it today. People weren’t even walking on the same street as me. Everyone avoided me, sat away from me, and I’m sure were incredibly uncomfortable. You get that not all these people are accustomed to armed guards being so near them, right?”

I bite my lip as I wait for Dad to say something. He has his head in his hand. Leaning back, he speaks calmly, “I know that, Aron, but you’re not at Thorton’s anymore where the security was so tight. This is college, and though there’s security, it’s nowhere near Thorton’s level. I cannot send you on your own.”

“I’m not saying that. I’m just asking that we lighten up, maybe ask the school to tighten their own security. I have armed men around me at all times. How am I and everyone else in my class supposed to pay attention when there’s people with guns next to them? We’re used to that, but they aren’t and Dad, I could just feel it. It was awkward, and Mom asked me today if I made any friends,” I grumble, looking over my shoulder as if I expected her to appear. She doesn’t, so I turn back to Dad, who seems to realize my problem by how he’s nodding.

“Of course I didn’t, because everyone is too scared to talk to me. I want to make friends. I want to meet new people. Will you at least think about it?” I plead.

Dad runs his hands through his hair, quietly contemplating. We talked about the security detail long before I started school. I knew a bunch of creepy stalkers would follow me, though I hoped people wouldn’t be so uncomfortable by their presence. Like Dad said, Holland’s security wasn’t as tight as Thorton’s. There are more people there that are not royalty or

political officials, although there are still many like myself and Langley. I figured some people would be ok with the guards. Perhaps it makes the situation a little different since I'm the prince. I'd like for myself and everyone else to be as comfortable as we can.

Dad finally nods and says, "I'll try to find another option, but Aron, I am not risking your safety, so if I cannot find another option that can guarantee your safety, you will stick with the security detail you have now. Do you understand?"

I nod vigorously, smiling from ear to ear to show that I greatly appreciate him, at least considering it. Dad watches me with narrowed eyes, attempting to remain serious until his lips twitch back into a smile as well. Rolling his eyes at me, he stands and says, "Now come on, I'm starving."

I laugh and follow him, happy that we talked about it even if there's no guarantee.

"I see your security detail has lessened by like four," Langley chuckles upon entering our first period class on our second week of school. I roll my eyes at his attempt at a joke.

As Langley said, my security detail has lessened some. After my father spoke with campus security, they hired more guards on their own. My dad and I talked, and he informed me that my guards could not be much less than what they were, so nothing has really changed. I thanked him for lessening them even a bit and for trying to make things more comfortable for me. It was worth a shot, even if it didn't turn out the way I wished it to.

Some guards do their best to help me too though; they stand back further, some even strike up conversations with students. I'm sure they get bored as

well, following me around all day.

Groaning, I slam my face into the desk making Langley laugh more at my misfortunes. After a moment of torturing myself with head banging against the table, I look back to Langley and ask, “How am I going to survive college?”

“You don’t. No one does.”

I open my mouth to reply then close it as I think over the truth of that statement. Thinking about it makes me chuckle and I sit up straight in order to nod and say, “That makes me feel better, actually.”

“Figured it would.” Langley slaps me on the back then retrieves his notebook. I follow his lead and we sit together through class taking notes. I’ve become a lot better at taking notes thanks to Quinton, although I’d never tell him that.

Since we had a lot of time together our senior year Quinton taught me a lot of helpful tips. I even color code my notes now. It’s awful and I want to punch myself, but it works! Not to mention Quinton helps me study a lot, even if he’s at another school I will send him my notes and he’ll read off questions to help me study. I do the same for him. Surprisingly though, we don’t study on weekends together although he always comes over. My mother insists that he come over Friday afternoon after class and stay until Sunday evening. Quinton never argues because he has learned not to. Once again, should I be proud or concerned?

Anyway, it’s the second week of school and I have yet to make new friends. Langley is still the only person I’ve communicated with. People aren’t avoiding me as obvious as before. They walk on the same street as me from time to time. Students don’t run in the opposite direction when they see the scare detail coming their way. It’s a little better, although I

would prefer that people actually sit next to me in class or start a conversation. I've tried talking with others, but they normally quickly answer me and scurry off.

"Do we still have plans for everyone to meet up this Saturday?" Langley asks after class is dismissed, successfully breaking me from my train of thought.

I peer up at him from the floor where I'm currently stuffing things into my bag. I smile at remembering that we've made plans for Quinton, Autumn, Ariel, Langley and me to hang out Saturday for the day. Langley and I are the only ones going to the same college while Ariel, Autumn, and Quinton are a few hours away, Ariel being the farthest and Quinton the closest.

"Yeah, I'll keep checking in with Quinton and Autumn to make sure they're still good to go. We'll have to make future plans to meet up every two weeks or something." I laugh, jumping up and following Langley out of the classroom. He nods and talks to me about what all we should do that day. There's a bunch of stuff to do since this is the capital and I'm sure we'll find something, so I nod along to whatever he says and laugh at the choices he gives that would make Quinton immediately say no.

Our next class rolls around and I'm once again heading off on my own. My classes are fun when I have Langley, but when he isn't around, I immediately feel like crap. I know that there's no one in my next class to talk to. I know that I'll be sitting there watching others whisper to one another, talking about their days or even pointing at me as people still do that. It sucks because I don't really blame them for avoiding me.

Why would they risk talking to me when there's a chance they could get tackled to the ground? I know that has to be on their mind since there have

been times on the news where my guards or my parents tackled people who got too close or rushed at us. None of them want to get close to me.

It sucks. It's boring. It's hell-a depressing and I hate it. I used to hear stories about college, about how people made new friends, about how they had study groups, went to the movies together, panicked and questioned their future together or something. I always heard about college, so I was excited at the idea of this new part of my life. However, if this is how my next four years are going to be, I don't know if I can handle it.

I try telling myself as I walk to class that it will pass. That's all I can do. Langley gives me the same advice every time I bring it up too, as does Quinton. It's a lot easier said than done.

I sit down at the desk I have dubbed mine, seeing as I always sit here. My head is hung low afterwards, as it normally is. I'm scribbling in my notebook that has become more scribbles than notes to be perfectly honest while contemplating how I can talk to anyone without scaring the life right out of them. As I'm grumbling about the problems at hand, I hear an unfamiliar voice call out to me, "Excuse me, Your Highness?"

I stop scribbling the moment I heard that unfamiliar voice. Looking up from my master artistry, there's a girl standing a few steps from my seat. The guards take a step forward, just in case. She glances nervously at them, treating a step. Blinking rapidly, I turn my head as if I expect some other royal to be there, then realize that nope, it is definitely me she is talking to and turn back to face her.

"Hello?" I hesitantly raise my hand to wave at her. I imagine saying more would be a better idea. However, I'm kind of inwardly panicking that someone is actually talking to me.

She grips the strap of the messenger bag across her chest. Her dark brown eyes take in the guards, scan over them for a moment before she takes a deep breath and says, “I... I noticed no one sits with you during class, so if you don’t mind, I’d like to...sit...with you.”

My lips slip into a smile when her face scrunches up in what looks to be a grimace, like she regrets what she said. Shaking her head, she mumbles something to herself, then stands a little straighter and attempts to recover by saying, “My name is Nora. I would like to thank you, which is why I’d like to sit with you.” Her lip quiver. “That was worse, wasn’t it?”

“Not at all.” I laugh, happily patting the seat next to me.

Sadly, the guards step in and inform her they’re going to have to search her prior to sitting next to me. I smile apologetically at Nora, but she nods and shyly hands over her bag. Thankfully, the guards pull nothing out for the whole world to see. They do a quick search of her pockets by asking her to pull them out. Once done, they allow her to scoot in next to me.

When Nora finally sits down, she releases a long breath. “That was nerve-wracking.”

“Sorry.”

“Oh no, no, it could have been a lot worse.” She laughs nervously and begins getting her belongings out needed for class. She brushes back the few short strands of her jet black hair before looking at me with a warm smile. “Um... I wanted to say thank you for being so brave and coming out last year.”

“I wouldn’t really call it brave,” I mumble, thinking back to that situation and how it was more of a spur-of-the-moment decision. I didn’t think it through, and though I’ve had some difficulties up till now, it’s certainly gone better than I had thought it would.

“No, it was brave, really. You have no idea how much you’ve helped people, Your Highness.” Nora nods, somehow gaining a bit more confidence and actually keeping eye contact with me.

“Aron is fine. We’re classmates, after all.” I smile at the shocked expression Nora gives me. Her expression tells me she is not comfortable enough to call me Aron. Then again, no one ever is. It always takes time for people to get used to calling me by my name. However, when people call me My Lord or Your Highness, they are even more tense and I don’t like that.

“Aron,” she mumbles, her eyes once again looking at the guards as if she expects them to snap. They don’t and so she looks back at me. “After you came out, I worked up the nerve to ask out my girlfriend. Turns out she liked me too.” Nora smiles so brightly that I actually think I’ve gone blind for a moment. “We’ve been together for almost a year now, and recently, I came out to my parents. They didn’t take it so well but are getting used to it, I guess. Regardless, the relief I feel now is indescribable. You really helped a lot of people, even if you don’t want to admit that you did, so thank you... Aron.”

My stomach turns to complete goo. I sink into my seat, totally unaware of how to respond to that. I throw my hands over my face that slowly heats up until I’m sure I’m beet red. By Nora’s giggles, I’m assuming that I’m right. I grumble and moan into my hands while contemplating what to say.

There are really no words. How can I respond to that? How can I possibly have anything to say? This girl just told me I somehow helped her date her girlfriend of nearly a year and come out to her parents. All I did was scream my feelings to Quinton in a hallway because I was scared and didn’t know

what else to do. I don’t feel like I deserve that kind of praise, yet here Nora is telling me thanks for doing something stupid.

I peek through my fingers to see her smile. It only helps keep me as a pile of goo that can only groan out, “I don’t really deserve that kind of... I don’t know what to say.”

Nora laughs heartily. Shrugging, she leans back in her seat and says softly, “You don’t need to say anything at all.”

I don’t know if I am saddened or thankful for our professor, who comes in and stops our conversation from continuing. Nora offers another smile, then focuses on class. I would like to be the ever-dedicated student who always listens, but I’m too busy thinking about what Nora said. My chest heats up; as do my cheeks that I constantly try to cool off by pressing the back of my hands to them. My hands are cool compared to my face, so I figured it’d work, but it doesn’t.

It’s kind of flattering thinking about it, but as I said before, I don’t feel that I deserve such praise. It makes me nervous and, sadly; I haven’t come up with a response by the time class ends. We’re excused. Nora stands up as she grabs her things. Quickly, I jump up and ask, “Are you free after this?”

Nora’s eyes widen. She nods and answers, “Yeah, I’m on lunch.”

“Would you,” I bite my lip, wondering if this is too much to ask. “Would you like to eat lunch with my friend Langley and me?”

Nora’s eyes remain wide as she goes from curious to shocked. She looks to the guards nervously, back to me, then smiles and nods. Nora packs the last of her things and asks, “Would you mind if my girlfriend came along? She’s on lunch too.”

“Not at all, the more the merrier!” I nod and follow Nora out of class since she claims that she and her girlfriend normally meet right outside the

building. As Nora said, we reach the doors to find a petite blonde waiting for us. She stiffens a bit upon seeing me, nervously looks about a lot like Nora did, but composes herself much quicker. Slowly, she opens her arms for Nora when she runs at her.

“Cass!” Nora calls, smothering her face with kisses. “Cassidy, this is...” Nora looks at me with wide eyes, like she isn’t sure if she can say my name. I shrug and she turns back to mumble, “A-Aron.”

“Really?” Cassidy gasps so sarcastically that it makes me laugh. Nora pouts, rolls her eyes, then looks to her feet while mumbling something about introductions being natural.

Cassidy laughs and politely bows, making me nervous as I quickly sputter out, “Bowing isn’t necessary.”

Cassidy quickly stands back up, reaches for Nora’s hand and squeezes it while Nora says; “His Highness,” Nora stops, takes a breath, then corrects herself. “Aron invited us to eat lunch with him and his friend. I figured it’d be alright with you.”

Cassidy nods, though hesitant when my guards explain to her they need to search her too. She blushes, whispers something to the guard that makes him blush, and Nora busts out laughing while shouting, “What luck that you’re on your period!”

Cassidy turns scarlet, smacking Nora in the back, though it only makes her laugh harder. I laugh too while my guard searches Cassidy’s purse, showing none of her feminine hygiene products. When he finishes, Cassidy takes her purse, throws it over her arm, and stomps ahead of Nora, who is still laughing along with me.

“You and Quinton don’t go to the same school, then?” Nora asks, walking next to me to the student center.

I’m about to ask how she knows Quinton until I remember she must have seen our very viral confession video, considering what she said earlier. I’m the prince and Quinton is basically a prince too now, thanks to all the publicity he gets. Everyone knows his face, knows his past, probably knows his damn measurements for all I know!

I nod and reply, “He’s going to Hensley University.”

“Hensley? As in one of the top schools for the science field, Hensley?” Nora asks, wide-eyed and impressed. By now, Cassidy has returned to Nora’s side and seems intrigued as well.

It makes me pout as I look between the impressed girls before grumbling, “Yes, that Hensley.”

“He must be a genius,” Cassidy says.

“He’s a cocky bastard is all!” I quickly spit out because seeing them both look so impressed makes me immediately envision Quinton nodding his head approvingly. I can’t let more people add to his already huge ego! Even if he’s not here, I bet he can sense the compliments!

Cassidy cocks her head to the side curiously while Nora says, “You’d have to be a bit more than cocky to get into Hensley.”

I puff out my cheek in slight annoyance and also defeat, seeing as Cassidy is right. Quinton graduated top of the freaking school with his perfect fucking grades. It was ridiculous! Obviously, he got into a great college and I can’t even try to say that he’s a dumb ass because clearly he isn’t. Whatever, he’s a dumb ass when it comes to common sense! Like knowing not to hide things from me, which he continuously does because he is a dumb ass when it comes to common sense, so ha!

I wave Cassidy’s comment off, making the girls giggle. I think I hear Nora mentioning something about being cute that I ignore because I hear

that far too much from my mother. She continuously squeals when she catches Quinton and me holding hands, kissing, sitting close, it doesn't matter. She just squeals all the time. It's gotten to the point that neither Quinton and I bother with her anymore. She squeals, stops, leaves and we act as if it never happened. It's better for our mental health that way.

The three of us reach the student center, where Langley waits outside on a bench. He has his nose buried in his phone, most likely talking to Ariel, so he doesn't notice the girls next to me and begins talking directly to me, "I swear to God if you make me go to that damn chicken place again I am going to vomit on you."

Nora grimaces while Cassidy says, "I like the Chicken Barn."

Which is the damn chicken place Langley was talking about. Why it's called that, I don't know, but it has great chicken. Before I can comment, Langley looks up to see that I have come with new people. I smile from ear to ear when he glances between the girls, shocked that someone has come within five feet of me, before asking, "How much did he pay you to walk with him?"

Thankfully, Cassidy and Nora try to contain their giggles, but Cassidy ends up letting out a roar of laughter before slamming both hands over her mouth. I say nothing because I feel the girls are still a little nervous around me, so they are trying not to tease me too much. Instead, I kick Langley in the ankle while saying, "Langley, this is Nora and her girlfriend, Cassidy. Girls, this is my asshole friend who you will never see again because I am going to dispose of his corpse later this evening."

"I don't think it's a good idea to talk about disposing of his corpse in public. If you're going to murder someone, you must do it discreetly," Cassidy comments, making Nora give her this look like she's insane.

She then looks at Langley before asking, “Should I be concerned?”

Cassidy smiles and shrugs.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you,” Langley says. He stands up, adjusting his bag over his shoulder with a smile. I can see in his face that he is very pleased that I’ve talked to someone other than him. “Thanks for actually speaking with this jerk. He’s been crying all week about how people won’t make friends with him.”

“Dude!” I hiss. Langley ignores me. I’m thinking he’s spent too much time with Quinton. I can’t handle them both messing with me like this. It’s getting annoying and one of them is going to die! Preferably Langley because, well, obviously not Quinton for obvious reasons.

Cassidy seems taken aback, her eyes shifting between me and Langley. Nora gawks at me with this sad puppy expression.

“You know, just coming to a new school, I wanted to make some friends in college, but I totally get why people are avoiding me. I’d avoid me too if I were them,” I explain.

“I promise to sit with you every day from now on,” Nora says, but quickly throws her hand over her mouth like she thought she shouldn’t have said it. I laugh when she continues, “If...if you want me to, that is. Not to, like, force you or anything.”

“No, it’s ok. I’d like that.” I nod, hoping that it doesn’t appear too enthusiastic. By the way Langley is chuckling, and the girls are grinning. I’m guessing it’s pretty obvious how happy I am by the idea of having someone else to talk to on campus.

“Enough of this mushy shit, let’s eat!” Langley exclaims, throwing his arm around my shoulder while dragging me off towards the food court.

The girls follow and it seems they are a bit more comfortable with Langley around. I suppose that makes sense since they see how open he is with me, along with how easily he teases me. Slowly, Cassidy throws in a few jokes as well, though Nora hasn't and I suspect it will take her more time. It's nice, though, having someone else in our group. Not to say that spending time with Langley is boring, it's just reassuring to know that I won't be alone on campus anymore.

I always see other students shouting down the street at their friends. I see them stopping to say hello or going to school events together. I see them sitting together in class and how everyone seems to have a group that they spend the most time with, yet somehow still break out of their shell enough to talk to others. I've always wanted that because in college that's kind of what I feel I should do, make friends, meet new people, communicate with others and I finally feel like I'm getting to do that.

Though Nora and Cassidy spend lunch together with us, we don't see each other afterwards. Cassidy and I discovered we share classes together on Tuesday and Thursday. We all make plans to meet up for lunch from now on, too. I leave school with a bit of a hop in my step. I do not inform my mother or Quinton of this new development, just in case. There is this voice in the back of my head saying that perhaps they are simply agreeing to see me sometime because I'm, well, me.

There's always a chance that they actually aren't interested in being friends. There's a chance I am being used and that maybe in a week they'll start asking if they can borrow money or something. Who knows?! Of course, thinking like that ruins the hop once in my step.

However, as the week goes on, I think that maybe Nora and Cassidy actually are nice people. Well, Nora more so than Cassidy because she is

obviously a sadist, continuously poking fun at everyone while cackling evilly. She's evil, I swear, and Nora even agrees with me, but apparently she's adorable. I guess I can understand that Quinton is pretty adorable from time to time whenever he isn't running off at the mouth.

The entire week, Cassidy and Nora actually spend time with Langley and me. As the week goes on, they get a bit more open. I feel like a normal college student and it causes me to smile giddily every day. It isn't until Friday when the four of us are once again in the food court eating our lunches that Langley asks out of the blue, "What are you girls doing tomorrow?"

"Sleeping," Cassidy replies instantly, and it causes me to snort as I'm taking a drink. Nora giggles and rubs my back while I try to regain my composure. Cassidy and Langley ignore my pain because I have learned that Cassidy is a bit of an asshole too, should have figured with her being so short. All short people are angry!

"If you aren't busy, want to go on a trip around town with us and some of our high school pals? My girlfriend, as well as Aron's lover boy and crazy B-F-F, are tagging along. I'm sure Aron would love to show off his new friends," Langley asks, causing me to choke on my drink again. Now Nora is patting my back because she's become concerned that I've choked twice while Cassidy laughs.

"We'd love to!" Nora exclaims and once again looks to me for permission.

Once I've regained my composure, I smile sheepishly and say, "If you guys want to, you can. Don't feel obligated or anything." Because I kind of feel like they might feel bad for saying no with me sitting right beside them.

“No way. I’d love to meet the famous asshole Quinton. We’ll get along, I’m sure.” Cassidy winks and it makes me realize that they totally would because Cassidy and Quinton are alike in the sense that they enjoy causing others’ discomfort. My eyes widen at the thought and I immediately picture all the people in my life spending the day together while constantly teasing me. I’m not ok with that.

“You’re not invited,” I say, pointing at Cassidy. She places a hand over heart and gasps. “Nora can come, but you can’t.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let her tease you too much,” Nora reassures me, patting Cassidy’s leg rather roughly beneath the table. Cassidy continues to act offended, but now she’s directing it at Nora.

“At least Nora has my back,” I grumble, glaring at Cassidy, then at Langley, who throws his arms up as if to say ‘what did I do’. Langley always does something. That’s the way he is, so I just roll my eyes and return to eating my sandwich.

We all exchange phone numbers afterwards, tell each other where and when we plan to meet, then go our separate ways. After Nora and Cassidy are gone, I look at Langley and ask, “You don’t think they’re just coming along because of me, do you?”

Langley stops in his texting. He opens his mouth to speak, tilts his head to the side in thought then replies, “No, I know that you’re in a position where you have to assume everyone is out to get you, but that doesn’t mean we can’t at least give them a shot, right?”

Sometimes I think Langley was specifically sent to help me survive life because he says some of the greatest things. Langley, seeing my look of shock, shrugs as if to ask me why I’m staring at him so oddly. With a heavy

sigh, I shake my head and grumble, “Why must you make sense? I don’t like agreeing with you.”

Langley grins and nudges me playfully. “You could simply say; thanks Langley for being the most awesome friend to ever exist. Go on, say it.”

“Fuck you.”

“That wasn’t even close.”

The day ends. I’m walking back to the parking lot when I decide to call up Quinton and inform him of the two new additions to our Saturday plans. I’m not surprised when he answers with an annoyed, “What?”

“Will you ever answer with a normal hello?” I ask, rolling my eyes. He always answers with a taunt or an annoyed question. Whatever, he messages me all throughout the day so he can’t even pretend he doesn’t want to talk to me!

Silence follows my question, which gives me my answer. He could at least answer, freaking asshole. I shake my head and say, “We’re going to have some more people coming with us tomorrow if my dad allows it.”

Quinton, surprisingly, doesn’t let out an annoyed grunt. Instead, he actually asks, “Who?”

“Their names are Nora and Cassidy. I met Nora on Monday. She thanked me for coming out because it helped her get with Cassidy. We’ve been hanging out with them all week. Langley invited them, though. I hope they don’t feel obligated to go. We’ll find out tomorrow, I guess,” I answer, somehow finding myself rambling out my thoughts from earlier.

“Your mom will be happy to hear it. I suspect I will get some messages later, conveying her excitement to me,” Quinton hums.

I chuckle at how he doesn’t even sound annoyed because, once again, he has grown used to it. My mother keeps in contact with Quinton probably as

much as I do. It’s kind of annoying in a way. Why can’t Quinton have trouble with my parents? It would be funnier for me, but no, my mother has to adore him, most likely enlarging his already colossal ego.

I nod as I think of how happy my mother will be to hear of any new people in my life. “She sure will be. I just hope after Saturday she can stay happy.”

“I’m sure they are coming because they want to,” Quinton says, actually sounding reassuring.

I cock a brow even if he can’t see me. I open my mouth to reply, but nothing really comes out because it’s always strange when Quinton tries to reassure me. I sometimes forget he has feelings.

“When you reassure me, it kind of bothers me. How am I meant to respond?” I smirk, leaning back into the seat while thinking about tonight. It’s strange not seeing Quinton for a while, so knowing that in a few hours I’m going to see him makes my stomach erupt with butterflies, not that I’ll ever tell him that.

“I could stop.” Yep, butterflies are gone.

I grumble about how he will always remain an asshole, causing him to chuckle. There’s a moment of silence while I contemplate why I bother putting up with him until I am reminded a moment later why by him saying, “I’m sure they are nice girls, Aron. Things will be fine tomorrow. Trust me.”

Simple and to the point, which is very Quinton like, yet it still relieves me enough to nod. I realize he can’t see my nodding so I clear my throat and awkwardly reply, “Yeah...you’re right.”

I can actually feel Quinton smirking when he says, “Glad you have come to see reason.”

“Fuck you, sometimes you’re right and sometimes I am!” I shout, sitting up as I throw my arms about crazily in the back. It’s sad my driver doesn’t even give me a questioning glance. He’s so used to me I don’t phase him. Should I be bothered by that? Eh, whatever.

“I’ve got class in a few minutes. I’ll call you later,” Quinton says, stopping me from yelling at him. I can yell at him later when he comes over after his classes.

I nod. “Ok, call me whenever you’re on your way.”

Quinton hums, rather than saying goodbye. He replies quickly, almost instinctively, “Bye, love you.”

I blink rapidly, holding the phone against my face, regardless of the fact that Quinton’s already hung up. I wonder if he realizes what he said or how he said it with no hesitation. It was like he said it out of instinct, without really meaning to or thinking about it, which is pretty normal for us. We let it slip out randomly, over little things and it has even more of an impact because I never forget the times he’s said it, especially him. Quinton definitely says it first less than I do, so when he does, its even more shocking.

My cheeks flush. I quickly drop my phone into my lap. For whatever reason, it’s making his voice ring in my ears. I sink back into the seat while I throw my hands over my face to hide my cheek-breaking smile. It’s embarrassing, it always is, and I’m glad he isn’t here to see my blush. He’d make fun of me for sure.

I contemplate texting him, but I’m sure if I did or even attempted to point out that he said it, he’d get pissed off. Besides, he will be coming over later and now I’m even more excited to see him, so I simply sit as a pathetic mess in the backseat while thinking *I love you too, asshole*.

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Notes from the Author

I sincerely want to thank everyone who has purchased Volume One of Speak the Truth. I never expected all the support that I received. I definitely didn't expect people outside of my tapas and wattpad audience to purchase Speak the Truth, although I was always hopeful! Some people have sent pictures with their purchase and it made my heart sing. Seeing readers holding my book made me cry. Having a copy of my own on my desk makes my heart soar. Just thank you. I hope volume two lived up to your expectations and that you look forward to volume three!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Twoony is a queer geek with a love for storytelling in all forms; movies, comics, books, games, and more. They write young adult and adult stories ranging from the always enjoyable teen rom-com to fantasy romances. At the age of twelve, they posted their first story online and have been addicted to sharing ever since. Although Twoony graduated from California University of PA with a Bachelors in Graphics & Multimedia, their true passion has always been writing. After creating original novels and comics on sites like Tapas and Wattpad, amounting over 105k subscribers and 7m+ reads, they have managed to live their dream. They are a full-time writer with three needy cats and not enough bookshelves. If you're interested in their work, they have a completed romantic trilogy called Speak the Truth and a standalone romantasy called Whisper Woods also available on amazon. Otherwise, follow their social media to learn more.

Wattpad: Twoony

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